

# **Nine LiFelines**

## **A Psycho Cat and the Landlady Mystery**

Joyce Ann Brown

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DEDICATION

For my mother. She loved and cherished all pets.

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## CHAPTER 1 **THE ELEVATOR**

“Don’t tell me. Let me guess. We stopped on the wrong floor—again.”

Beth’s lanky husband, Arnie, his bottom half inside and his top half outside the elevator, held the *Open* button with one finger while he twisted his head around his grocery sack to see the number above the door in the hallway. He had pressed *10* in the lobby, and the display read *10*, but the number in the hall didn’t match.

“It took us to the eighth floor this time,” Arnie said, “and there’s no one here waiting—again.” He pulled his head back inside and punched the *10*, none too gently, his irritation emphasizing the wrinkles on his suntanned forehead.

“This has happened every time.” Beth shifted her bulky grocery bag to the other arm and ran her hand through her undisciplined silver-blond curls. “Don’t you think we’d better tell the management? Darn it, I’m getting tired of this.” She bumped her bag with the arm she jerked down to emphasize her words. “Oops.” Arnie caught and stabilized her load before the groceries could fall all over the elevator floor. “Thanks.”

“Sure.” Her husband took Beth’s habitual klutziness in stride.

“This problem has probably been reported,” Arnie said. “We just moved in. We don’t want to start complaining so soon.”

Beth sighed and leaned her small frame back against the wall to relieve the weight of her package. “But this is inconvenient and...and spooky and...”

She glanced through the opening from her new viewpoint just as the doors were about to snap together. With her free hand, she slapped the Open button, and the doors swooshed aside as if this unruly machine was always obedient to her every command. As if.

“Arnie, look. Something’s going on. Half the people in the building are standing in front of a door down there.” She took a step out into the hallway and crooked an index finger at Arnie.

With a skeptical frown, he followed. “Maybe they’re getting ready for an outing or something. We aren’t invited. It’s none of our business.”

“No, it looks like they’re looking at the door. Let’s go see what’s going on. We can explain we’re new to the building and accidentally got off on the wrong floor.”

“Humph. Here, give me your bag. I’m going on up. You can satisfy your curiosity without getting me involved.”

“Deal.”

Beth heard snippets of conversations as she neared the cluster of people. “Something needs to be done.” “I’m having double locks installed.” “One of these times, someone will be home, and then what will happen?”

At the edge of the noisy crowd, Beth sidled up to a young teenaged girl who was holding a phone that emitted a constant series of beeps and chirps. Sending and receiving text messages, Beth decided. She must be telling the world, or at least her sphere of friends, about whatever was happening.

“What’s going on here?” Beth asked.

The kid, her wavy red hair half over her face, glanced sideways at Beth and then back at her phone. Somehow she kept her thumbs busy punching letters while she answered. “Another lock was picked. That old woman’s apartment got robbed.”

“Robbed? What did they take—jewelry, money, electronics?” Beth looked up and down the hallway. There wasn’t any way a thief could make off with televisions and computers without being caught before exiting the building, what with the security guard and the cameras at the exits. “Where’s the elderly woman whose stuff was taken?”

The girl looked at Beth more carefully and had the grace to look sheepish. “I mean, the widow lady who lives here, Mrs. Burke over there...” She pointed to a middle-aged woman, about Beth’s age. “...is missing some little thing. I heard them say that this time the crook took a package of fancy buttons the lady bought to sew on a shirt.”

“This time?”

“Yeah.” The teen looked up and narrowed her eyes. “Do you live in this building?”

“The tenth floor. We just moved in a couple of weeks ago.”

“Oh. Okay. Somebody has been picking the locks and breaking into condos all over the building. I’m not sure how many’ve been robbed. Only one small thing is taken from each place. One time it was a box of paper clips. Weird, huh? And the robber always dents or scratches the doors. My family’s condo hasn’t been broken into yet, but no telling when it’ll happen. My dad put a chain lock on the inside so no one can just pick the lock and get in, at least not when we’re home.”

“Are the police involved?”

“I don’t know. But why would anybody call the police about someone stealing a cup or some coasters?”

One time it was a refrigerator magnet that some people got on vacation or something. Not very valuable stuff.”

Beth nodded her head, but she wasn't convinced. Surely some of the people who'd had break-ins had reported them to the police. Because of the door damage, if nothing else, so they could turn in claims to their insurance companies.

From the eighth floor, the elevator took her to the tenth. That's how it worked. The elevator would never take them to their floor from the lobby or from the basement garage level, but after they reached a different floor, an unpredictable one, and pressed 10 again, it went straight to the tenth. Beth and Arnie at first thought kids might be pushing the elevator buttons in the hallways and then running away and hiding. But, on all those different floors? Every time they rode the elevator? Now she found out condos were being robbed all over the building. Unnerving. Why hadn't she known about these problems as the landlady of the sixth-floor condo she owned, before they moved to their new place on the tenth floor? Of course, she hadn't paid lots of attention to the monthly West-Gate Condominiums' newsletter. It had seemed mostly for residents, not owners.

“It sounds like some sneaky kids are doing this just to irritate people,” Arnie said after Beth got home and told him about the break-ins. “When this was an apartment building, it was restricted to people over the age of twenty, wasn't it? I wonder when they decided against that policy.”

“It might have been at the time the apartments were converted to condos. Maybe they couldn't sell enough of them without selling to people with children. A few children lived in the building when we bought the rental. That was what, eleven or twelve years ago?”

When Beth went into the kitchen, their impish cat, Sylvester, or Psycho Cat as they called him, jumped off

the top of the refrigerator, galloped through the living room, into the bedroom hallway, and through the door at the end of the hall. From there he jumped onto one of the unpacked boxes and hurled himself back into the kitchen where Beth and Arnie were storing the groceries. Now, he rolled onto his back demanding attention. The kitty was still adjusting to his new home and didn't like being left alone. Beth rubbed her cat's belly while she discussed the eerie elevator and burglar anomalies with Arnie.

"I'm glad the condos accept all ages," Beth said with a toothy smile. "I like to see young people around. I mean, most young people aren't scoundrels. Besides, I couldn't have rented to Viktor and H  l  ne and their sweet little Fabienne, if kids weren't allowed here. Our grandkids will be glad to have other youngsters around when they visit us."

"Okay. Your slow-paying renters may not be your best argument, but good point about playmates for the grandkids. What's your guess about the break-ins, then?"

"I don't know yet, but I'm going to work on it."

"Oh, no. No detective work. We're supposed to be retired now, Beth. You need to stay out of this and let people contact the authorities, people who know how to solve crimes without getting into trouble."

The truth was Beth had stuck her nose into a couple of situations involving rental properties she owned and managed. Arnie didn't approve of her involvement. Arnie was a hands-off kind of guy and also protective of her, but Beth felt the need to step in and do something. She couldn't help it.

Beth crossed her arms and puffed up. "Well, the cases I helped solve were extraordinary circumstances, you must admit."

In the end, in spite of his disapproval and warnings, Arnie had been there for her when she took on those cases. However reluctant, it was hard to stay

uncommitted when his family and property were involved.”

“Well,” Arnie said, “at least this is about door dings and stolen refrigerator magnets, not dead bodies.” It was a good thing Beth’s husband wasn’t clairvoyant. He might have insisted they sell their new digs immediately and move to Florida if he’d known what was coming.

Psycho Cat purred so loudly over his belly rub that Beth had to lean down and hug the huge yellow feline. Arnie laughed and finished storing the groceries.



## CHAPTER 2

### **THE RENTERS**

Beth had become a little more patient and tolerant over the years, but in her estimation, she hadn't slowed down or aged one bit. She still power-walked on the Trolley Track Trail, which followed the path of the old trolley run right through the Brookside neighborhood shopping area and alongside their condo building. Convenient. She'd sold the duplexes she had owned and managed for most of her working years, but she still worked as the landlady of the one-bedroom condo on the sixth floor at the West-Gate Condos, the sixties-style "Puce Goose" as people called it. Puce wasn't so bad, as long as she thought of it as a purplish shade of brown rather than pink.

Beth liked her young renters, Viktor and H el ene Lutsenko and their baby daughter, Fabienne. Arnie had trouble with Viktor's accent and H el ene's and Fabienne's names. The name H el ene looked like Helen but was pronounced Ay-LEN. The daughter's name looked like Fabian, but the French pronunciation was Fah-bee-EN. Arnie's visual memory of the names written on Beth's rental agreement perpetuated his confusion. But Beth thought living in the same condo

building and seeing them often would help him get it straight.

Arnie and she had purchased their three-bedroom condo on the penthouse floor of the building after they sold their big house a few blocks south. They called it the penthouse floor because the huge condo across the hall from them took up one whole side of the building on the top floor. Everyone at the West-Gate called that big condo “the penthouse” even though it wasn’t, in the traditional sense. Selling, packing, and moving in took most of the past spring. Theirs wasn’t the penthouse, but it was nice, and it had a fantastic view.

Sylvester, on the other hand, seemed to be slowing down with age and gaining weight, too. Now twenty-two pounds, he would manage great spurts of energy every so often, but the crazy antics he performed in his younger days, such as running up the recliner and launching off the top into the room beyond over and over, earning him his Psycho Cat nickname, happened less often. He still had the instincts, though, that warned Beth when things weren’t quite right.

To give her kitty the exercise he needed, Beth put the small dog-sized animal in a halter and walked him on a leash. The morning after learning about the break-ins, while the sultry Kansas City summer morning was still cool enough for a walk, Beth held the front door of the condo building open so her cat could prance through. People in the lobby looked on with smiles and giggles. Over her shoulder, she carried a lightweight, folded, jogging stroller lined with an old blanket for the cat to ride in when he became tired. The big guy wouldn’t walk all the way because Beth walked four or five miles at a speed-walking pace on the trail.

“You take care of Mrs. Stockwell, now, Sylvester. Don’t let her trip on those front steps.” Al, the stocky front desk security guard, grinned and rushed over to help Beth open the door. Al had known Beth as the

landlady of her rental condo even before she became a tenant, and he wasn't averse to telling her that walking a cat on a hiking/biking trail was tantamount to riding a pig on a horse trail. Neither of which he'd ever try. He also knew about Beth's proclivity for stumbling and fumbling.

"Very funny, Al," Beth said. "Really, I think I might be a cured klutz. I'm more relaxed now that I don't have all that property to..."

While she stood talking to Al in the doorway, Psycho Cat reached the cement steps and pulled Beth along. Beth waved at Al and stumbled down the steps, regaining her footing and readjusting the stroller at the bottom. She glanced back at the laughing doorman with a wry smile and then turned her full attention to control of the cat as they sauntered along the sidewalk toward the trail with many stops for sniffing and rolling in the grass along the way.

The sunny July morning found scads of people out on the Trolley Track Trail. Kids out for summer vacation rode their bikes. Single runners and joggers in groups passed by, people walked dogs of all sizes, and mamas pushed strollers. Beth figured they'd all want to get off the trail before the blazing summer sun and humidity turned Kansas City into a steam bath by noon.

Many folks slowed and smiled or stopped to comment and try to stroke Psycho Cat, and dogs had to be pulled away by their leashes. Beth decided it was time to set the cat in his outfitted stroller. She stopped beside the trail to shorten the leash so she could fasten it to the handles, in case Psycho Cat decided to try to leap out at a squirrel, when she heard a squeal.

"Vesther!"

Her renter, lithe, dark-haired H el ene, pushed curly-haired Fabienne's stroller up beside Beth. "It's Sylvester, Fabienne."

“Vesther.” The little girl reached out of her conveyance toward the cat’s furry tail. She tugged, and Psycho Cat tried to bolt.

“She’s pronouncing that name well for not yet being two years old,” Beth said. She gently lifted the cat out from under the stroller and tried to calm him with soft strokes.

Hélène looked as proud as if her child had just won the Nobel Prize. “Her French is coming along, too, but sometimes I can’t tell which language she’s using. I’ll start her in preschool when she gets a little older. I hope she’ll learn to speak English like a native.”

“Wonderful,” Beth said. “What a gift to be brought up bilingual. Or multilingual. She must be learning her dad’s Ukrainian language at the same time, right?”

Hélène’s face fell into a sad frown for an instant before she gazed at her daughter and smiled. “Sometimes she speaks words I know she learned from Viktor, but he’s away on business so much...”

“Is he out of town this week?”

“Oui. He won’t be home until early Thursday, I think. He has calls in Kansas City on Thursday afternoon and Friday.” When she heard a throaty meow and saw the switching of the puffed up yellow tail, she leaned over and pulled her little girl’s hand away from Psycho Cat. “You must be gentle with kitties, chérie.”

“It’s only Tuesday. Makes for a lot of time alone with the little one. Why don’t you and Fabienne come up to our new condo for dinner tomorrow evening? Arnie can put something on the grill, and we’ll eat on the balcony looking out over Brookside. We can see all the way to the Country Club Plaza, and the hundreds of trees in the residential areas make the shopping areas look like little islands of activity.”

“Ah, like some of the neighborhoods of Paris from Mont Marte.”

“Not quite so expansive, but still amazing.”

“Thank you. I’d love to come. I will bring the hors-d’oeuvres.”

“Oh, you don’t have to...”

“But, please. It will give me the reason to prepare special food. For me only, it is not fun to cook.”

“Of course, then. Real French hors-d’oeuvres will be a treat.”

Hélène pulled the toddler, who still lunged toward the irritated cat, out of her stroller. “Are you sure Fabienne will not be a bother?”

“Not at all. Arnie and I love young children. My grandchildren are growing so fast. I miss their babyhoods.”

“Beth, I’m sorry the rent is late again this month. I will not be able to pay until Viktor gets paid. There isn’t enough in our household account right now.”

Beth felt embarrassed. She hadn’t approached the subject, but it had played at the back of her mind while she talked to Hélène. The rent had been late every month, and it was getting worse. What could she say? “I understand. Ask Viktor to bring a check up to me this weekend, and I’ll discuss it with him.”

Neither woman spoke as Hélène loaded her wiggling daughter into her stroller and prepared to head for the condo building. Beth gave Psycho Cat some reassuring strokes. As Hélène began to push away, Beth asked, “Does the elevator take you to the sixth floor when you press 6, or does it take you to a different floor?”

Hélène looked confused, as if she didn’t quite understand the question. “The elevator in our building?”

“Yes.”

“When I press the number six, the elevator takes me to the sixth floor, my floor.” She said it in a precise manner as if Beth might be a little slow on the uptake. “Why do you ask that question?”

“Arnie and I have had some trouble with the elevator, that’s all. I’d better get on with my walk while

Sylvester is being good. We'll see you tomorrow evening at about six-thirty, then. Is that too late for Fabienne?"

"I'll feed her earlier and bring some toys so she can play on the floor while we eat."

Beth headed down the trail at a fast clip, Psycho Cat in a ball on his cozy seat. "Shoot," she said, "I should have thought to ask H el ene if there've been any break-ins on her floor." It wasn't unusual for Beth to talk out loud to her cat when they were alone on the trail. People talked to their kids as they pushed strollers, didn't they? Psycho Cat seemed to enjoy the motion and the sound of Beth's voice because he stayed curled on the blanket and lay there as long as she kept pushing him along. His response to her chatter might be to open one eye or to flick an ear. Only when she had to stop at an intersection did the cat move about. Beth had learned to keep the stroller moving back and forth during those short stops to keep him from attempting a getaway.

After nodding to a passing jogger, Beth continued with a fresh thought. "Come to think of it, Psycho Cat, my friend, Viktor and H el ene's condo could have been broken into. I haven't been there lately, and they might not have told me if nothing more than a baby rattle was taken."

Psycho Cat's tail twitched.

"You're right. They'd have to tell me if the door was scratched up or dented, wouldn't they? H el ene is home most of the time. The intruder probably knocks first to make sure no one is there. I'll try to remember to ask her about it when she comes to dinner tomorrow. Our first guests at our new home. Won't that be fun? I'd better get busy unpacking the rest of the boxes. We can invite your favorite relatives, Meg and Paul, and other folks over soon, too."

Beth increased her walking speed with the incentive of returning home and making the condo ready for company. She wanted to invite her sister and brother-in-law over for dinner. Meg and Paul Knells helped Beth and Arnie move in, and Beth looked forward to treating them to a relaxing dinner in her sparkling, refurbished condo—her downsized home. Not small—but no outside maintenance, and with the security to leave without worry when they visited their kids and friends who lived in various parts of the county.

Meg—she might have some insight into the How and the Why of the condo break-ins. Beth could work on the Who. Meg taught middle school and dealt with tons of pranks. She'd never talked about anyone picking locks, but petty theft, yeah.

Those thoughts and plans percolated through Beth's mind as she returned on the Trolley Track Trail and approached the West-Gate Condo building from the back. What an attractive building it became after the condo owners' association voted to have new windows installed and balconies added to each condo unit. The siding remained that purplish-brown or pinkish-purple color, part of the sixties design that looked odd in the nineteen-twenties-style neighborhood and prompted ridicule, but it looked good with the old caulked metal trim refurbished and painted a neutral tan.

She shaded her eyes with her hand to gaze up at the tenth floor, proud to have such a commanding spot to call home. Her condo couldn't be seen from this perspective. It was on the opposite side from the trail, and its balcony faced the front of the building. The other regular condo on the tenth floor looked out over the rear parking lot. But the penthouse occupied the side of the building next to the trail and had two long balconies, one on the front of the building and one in the back. Beth could see the back from her viewpoint on the trail.

A young girl leaned out over the metal railing of that balcony looking toward the pool, long dark hair flowing, like Rapunzel letting down her hair for her prince, waiting to be rescued. Well, the hair wasn't that long, and the little girl was too young for a prince, but Beth loved to romanticize. The interesting thing was that she didn't know any children lived on or visited her floor. She'd never seen any kids. Maybe the girl arrived for a visit this morning while Beth was out on the trail. It'd be nice if the youngster could be there when her grandchildren visited. Maybe she'd meet the penthouse residents soon and ask about this juvenile Rapunzel.

Beth put Psycho Cat back on his leash and folded the stroller before she went back into the building. She looked forward to sparring again with Al about herding cats and all that. He was in a seemingly serious conversation with someone when she entered. She'd have to wait until next time. It occurred to her she should also ask him if anyone else had complained about the elevator trouble. He'd told her before that she'd have to refer that problem to the general manager who would then turn it over to maintenance. Living in a condo building had its conveniences but also its problems.

Just now, Beth wanted to get upstairs, start to work unpacking boxes, and get ready for company. The elevator didn't empathize with her priorities. It stopped on the ninth floor with little thwumps that sounded to Beth like ha, ha—impertinent titters at her impatience. When Beth stuck her head out to make sure no one was waiting, Psycho Cat on his leash darted into the hall and pulled her with him. Beth tried to catch hold of the door before it closed, but she missed and couldn't restrain the big, strong cat. The stroller barely made it through behind her as she clung to its strap with the hand not hanging onto the leash for dear life.

“No. Psycho Cat, you’ve already had your walk. Time to go home.” Beth planted her feet, but the feline pulled her forward, and she almost fell on her face before she lost her hold on the leash and watched it fly through the air and land around the cat. He had stopped to paw at a door near the middle of the long hall.

“That’s not our condo, Kitty,” Beth said in her baby and cat-soothing voice. She sidled toward the loose leash, trying her best not to startle her pet and make him take off again. Her stealth turned out to be unneeded. The cat paid no attention when she reached down and grabbed the grip. He focused his attention on the door and the area in front of it as he sniffed each square inch.

“Did you find the home of another cat? Or a dog? This isn’t quite like your old house where you ruled every square inch, is it, Buddy?”

Beth looked at the door, half expecting it to open and a hissing cat or a snarling dog to be standing there. Instead, she noticed a dim line of scratches below the doorknob. It looked as if someone had painted over them but had been unable to fill in the slight indentations. “Uh, oh. This must be one of the condos broken into by the lock-picking burglar. I wonder how long ago it happened and what was taken.”

She looked down at Psycho Cat as he expanded his sniffing exploration farther into the hallway. “What are you learning from your examination?”

Beth stood there regarding the cat’s curious behavior when the door was opened by a short, frowning, white-haired gentleman, reading spectacles on his nose and a newspaper in his hand. “I thought I heard noise out here. What can I do for you?” he asked in a gruff voice, his eyes shifting from Beth to the cat and back.

“Oh, sorry,” Beth said. “We were taking a walk—that is, I was walking my cat when he decided to stop and investigate your door.”

The man looked unconvinced as he rolled up his paper, perhaps to swat her away?

“Truly,” Beth said, “for some reason Psycho Cat came right over here and started sniffing.” The man’s eyebrows went up. “I mean, Sylvester. Psycho Cat is just his nickname, but I always call him that. Unless a young child is around. Then I use his real name, because I don’t think children should learn to call an animal psycho, do you?”

What was wrong with her? She was babbling.

“I thought maybe the door caught his interest because of the scratches,” she said, “Was your condo broken into by someone who picked the lock like happened to some of the others in the building?”

“A-hem.” The man cleared his throat and glared. “A thief normally returns to the scene of the crime, I’ve heard. Is that why you’re here?”

“Oh, no, no, no. We’re not burglars. We’re just... Well, my husband and I recently moved into a condo on the tenth floor, and I just found out about the break-ins yesterday. Besides, I don’t know how to pick a lock.”

Beth scratched her head and pulled the stroller strap higher on her shoulder. She tried to think how to make him believe her. Psycho Cat didn’t have to ponder. He walked right up to the fellow and rubbed around his legs. The action caused an immediate softening in the elderly man who stooped over to pet him.

“A-hem. I’ve been thinking about getting a pet. Was planning for a small dog, but this old boy seems pretty smart. Might consider a cat.” He didn’t smile, but the frown disappeared.

“Oh, Psycho...I mean, Sylvester almost has a sixth sense. You might like sharing your home with a cat.”

Psycho Cat rolled onto his back to ask for a rub. “You’ve certainly made a friend, here. He doesn’t expose his tummy unless he really trusts a person.”

The ice broken, the two introduced themselves. Beth learned that a nail file, a black comb, and a box of bandages, which the man had laid out on the bathroom sink to pack for a visit to his son’s house, were the only items Mr. Herman Houser found missing after his condo was broken into.

“It was irritating to have to go out and buy new,” he explained. I wasn’t nervous, just suspicious, when I heard you at my door.”

By the time their chat was over, Psycho Cat was lying at Herman’s feet purring, and Beth learned not only his name, but also his phone number. She promised to ask him up for dinner one evening.

Beth rode the elevator from the ninth floor to the tenth with a wry smile on her face. The problem she’d complained about only two hours ago had made it possible for her to meet another condo owner who might become a friend. Every inconvenience had its rewards, she guessed.



### CHAPTER 3

## **THE PENTHOUSE**

It seemed amazing to Beth how much Arnie and she were able to get done in one afternoon and evening when they put their minds to it. They unpacked all the moving boxes in the main rooms and in their bedroom. Only a few boxes, containing knickknacks and linens, were left in the guest room. Its door could remain closed for the time being.

Beth told Arnie what H el ene said about not having money for the rent until Viktor got paid. "According to my rental application records," she said, "that man's income varies between six and nine thousand a month. They should have plenty to pay the rent and utilities and their other expenses and still have money in the bank. I can understand forgetting and being late every once in a while, since he travels, but why wouldn't they have the money for H el ene to pay the rent when she remembers?"

"Another mystery. I don't know the answer," Arnie said, "but from a business standpoint, I'd advise you to evict them. They've been twenty-five days late already, and they're going to get worse and start skipping months before long."

“When H el ene and Fabienne come for dinner, you can help me question her, in a business kind of way, about why this is happening. She seems to be sincere when she apologizes about the rent being late. Maybe she’ll tell us why they’re so short of money.”

Wednesday morning, Beth wrote out a menu for the evening’s meal and announced to Arnie and Psycho Cat that she was going to walk to the grocery store. She only needed a few items and wanted to get there and back so she could parboil the rosy, fresh peaches she’d found at the Farmer’s Market several blocks south on the Trolley Track Trail, make the raspberries sauce for her Peach Melba dessert, and have time to let it cool in the refrigerator. When she opened the door to the hallway, Psycho Cat escaped and darted to the door of the penthouse.

Beth followed and examined the door. “No scratches or dents, Buddy. Are you trying to tell me we should take something over and introduce ourselves, maybe? It’ll have to be another day. This day is taken. Come on back home, now.”

The cat remained seated and pawed with renewed vigor at the neighbor’s door. Beth had given up long ago trying to pick up and carry twenty-two pounds of squirming cat. “Arnie,” she called in the direction of her door, “will you please get Psycho Cat and take him inside. He’s developed this new habit of pawing at strangers’ doors, and I can’t get him to come.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get him. You go on.”

“I’m going to stop by the office and ask about the elevator’s malfunction,” Beth said before she stepped into the waiting conveyance.

“I already sent a note. You don’t have to...” Arnie said, but the doors closed before Beth heard the rest. That was okay. She wanted to hear the excuses in person. Stopping on a different floor every once in a while was okay. She’d met Herman Houser that way,

hadn't she? But on a day like today when she was in a hurry, the extra stop could be a nuisance. She didn't want her grandkids and friends to have to deal with it.

"I'll have someone look into it," the manicured and coiffed manager told Beth, "but we've had no other complaints about the elevator. It will stop on a floor if someone has pushed the button, you know." Her smile looked plastic, and her tone sounded condescending, to say the least.

"It seems to happen only from the lobby to the tenth floor," Beth said. "And it's been happening since we moved in two, almost three, weeks ago, and there's usually no one waiting when it stops. I've talked to people who live on other floors, and the elevator works fine for them. I don't think kids are playing games with it, like my husband guessed."

"No. There aren't many children living in this building, and the ones who do are well-disciplined. Two weeks isn't very long. I've held this position for two years and have never heard a complaint about the elevator from anyone else on the tenth floor. Perhaps you've been so frenzied with your move that you've accidentally pressed the wrong floor button several times." Again, the forced-looking smile. "Take one of my cards, here, and call me if you continue to have trouble with the elevator."

Beth took the proffered card and read the name, Ms. Helper. She glanced at the woman's dismissive face. Ms. Helper, really?

She tried one more time. "There are only two condos and the penthouse on the tenth floor, Ms. Helper," she said, trying not to put much sarcasm into the name. "Our condo was vacant for a couple of years before we bought and renovated it. The other one is apparently used only a few times a year by a businessman who might not want to take the time to

register his experience with the elevator. And I have never met the people who live in the penthouse.”

Ms. Helper pressed some keys and scrolled through a page on her computer. “An older couple lives in the penthouse, possibly reclusive. But they have lived there for years, and I’ve never heard a complaint about the elevator from them.”

“Does a child live there? A young girl?”

“The term ‘couple’ doesn’t normally include a child.” That may have sounded snippy even to Ms. Helper because she stood, put out her hand to shake, and added, “There’s no reference to a child living there. Welcome to the West-Gate Condos, Mrs. Stockwell. You have my card. Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.”

Beth left the office shaking her head. Ms. Helper, indeed. Further assistance, phooey. She’d have to give some assistance before she could offer more. That woman must never leave her office. She’d had no idea who lived on the tenth floor without looking it up. As the owner and landlady of one of the condos, Beth had had no idea the association hired someone who seemed so reluctant to help with a tenant’s problems. Note to self, she thought, mention this experience to the condo association board.

It took Beth forty-five minutes to find the specialty items she needed at the store. Their two-story Tudor had closed a couple of months before the new condo was ready. She and Arnie had had to store, donate, or throw out lots of provisions and stay with her sister and brother-in-law, Meg and Paul, until they could move into their new home. The pantry herbs and spices had been in the throw-out category. Beth felt a little guilty to be replacing them all. She spent more time than she had planned in front of the spices, deciding which ones she needed first. It was past noon by the time she left the store carrying her two sacks of

groceries down the sidewalk toward the condo building in the hot sunshine.

She cut through the parking lot to the back door of the condo building to enter closer to the elevator. That way she wouldn't feel guilty about not stopping to talk to Al or answer questions about Psycho Cat from the folks sitting in the lobby. She needed to get her cold foods into the fridge. Like the day before, on the trail, she looked up toward the tenth floor as she approached. Would she see the mysterious Rapunzel looking down?

There was a figure up on the penthouse balcony, but it wasn't a girl. A man stood half above the handrail, facing inward, and waved his arms. Beth backed up a few steps for a better view. What was he doing? She couldn't see anyone else up there, but he might have been gesturing as he talked with someone. His head was close to a basket of flowers hanging from the ceiling of the balcony. Now, this was being nosy. Like peeking into a stranger's window. It was scary to watch, too, how he seemed to be so high—maybe standing on a chair or a stool from which he might fall?

The man disappeared. Whew. The sun beating down on the pavement made the parking lot a brutal place to hang out. Beth scurried to the back door. Not wanting to take the time to ring the bell and wait for Al to see her on the monitor and buzz the door open, she used her key.

While trying to hold the two grocery bags, put her keys away, and push the heavy door open with her hip, the strap of Beth's purse caught on the door handle. It pulled her backward as she stepped over the threshold. One bag fell off her arm, and items scattered across the floor. Beth squeaked.

A middle-aged woman, who had been headed toward the door, squatted to help her gather the

groceries. “Do you need some help getting these to your condo, Ma’am?” she asked.

“No, thank you anyway,” Beth said. “I’m just clumsy. My purse caught on the door handle, and... Well, it’s nice of you to offer.”

What was this Ma’am business? This lady wasn’t that young. She took the bag from the woman and pressed the number ten for the elevator. It took her to another floor where she surveyed the empty hall for a few seconds to be sure no one was waiting and then pressed ten again. She didn’t even take the time to find out which floor she’d stopped on this time.

At her condo, determined not to stumble through another door, Beth set her packages on the hallway floor before she again dug in her purse for her keys. As she stepped through her doorway, she glanced down the hall at the penthouse door. She didn’t expect to see anyone, but it would be nice to meet her neighbors instead of just seeing them on their balcony from below.

Arnie had gone golfing and planned to have lunch at the clubhouse with the guys afterward. Beth spotted Psycho Cat curled in a basket of magazines beside the sofa. She turned on some soft music for company while she unloaded her groceries and started the peaches.

The peaches needed to boil in the sugar water for two minutes. Beth spent one of those minutes twirling about in the living room to Michael Bublé singing “Feeling Good.” She would have continued had she not spun into an end table and had to catch the lamp before it crashed to the floor. Sigh.

After Beth scooted back into the kitchen to lift the first two peaches out of the pan to cool and put two more in to poach, she stood by the stove swinging her shoulders and torso to the singer’s rendition of “Sway.” She smiled, not only at the music, but also at her bright, open condo. From where she stood, she could

see the dining area, the cozy great room with its wall of windows, and the balcony where she and Arnie had formed the habit of sitting each evening at sunset with a glass of Pinot Grigio or Merlot. Her furnishings included favorite antiques from the old house combined with some new pieces of stuffed furniture.

The phone buzzed, and Beth turned down the music volume with her happy face intact. H el ene’s voice with its lilting French accent sounded tentative. She told Beth that Viktor’s Ukrainian brother had called to invite her and Fabienne to eat out with him.

“I told him we are dinning with my landlady and her husband this evening and that already I am making the hors-d’oeuvres. He told me it is okay—but—he is all alone.”

Beth didn’t give H el ene time to say anything more. “Please bring him with you. We have plenty of food and would love to meet your brother-in-law.”

“My brother-in-law? Oh, yes, my husband’s Ukrainian brother. I will ask him to come. Thank you for including him. He is—he watches out for us when Viktor is gone, and we are family for him.”

After a call to Arnie to stop by the store for another chicken breast, Beth continued her food preparations. She still needed to squeeze the raspberries to make the sauce for the Peach Melba—the perfect summer dessert, a cold poached peach with vanilla ice cream and fresh raspberry sauce on top. Then, she would put together ingredients for a sweet and sour cabbage slaw, prepare the green rice, and marinate the chicken. She hadn’t forgotten to buy a box of macaroni and cheese in case Fabienne was still hungry.

Beth wondered what this Ukrainian brother would be like. And why did H el ene refer to him as Viktor’s Ukrainian brother rather than her brother-in-law? It must be the French to English translation. Maybe the French word for “husband’s brother” didn’t translate to brother-in-law. That must be it.



## CHAPTER 4

### **THE UKRAINIAN BROTHER**

“**W**hen do you think I should start the grill?”  
Arnie asked.

“Why don’t we wait until after the guests arrive and we’ve eaten the goodies H el ene is bringing? She didn’t tell me what they are, and I have no idea how much food it will be, but I do know the French take their time over their meals. They probably won’t mind waiting for the main course after we eat appetizers.”

“You told me her guest is from the Ukraine. He might want everything fast.” Arnie’s eyes twinkled.

“Seriously. He might not even want to be here.” Beth set a flowered paper napkin at each of four places around the little table on the balcony. “Just play it by ear after they arrive. We’re lucky there’s a breeze this evening. I think we’ll eat the hors-d’oeuvres inside in the air conditioning. Maybe it’ll be cooler out here by the time we’re ready to eat.” She put silverware on top of the napkins after retrieving them from where they’d blown around on the table.

“We may not get a chance to question H  l  ne about the overdue rent problem with Viktor’s brother standing by,” Arnie said.

The doorbell rang, and Beth answered in a low voice with her hand to one side of her mouth as she started toward the door. “I imagine I’ll have to wait until Viktor returns. Let’s not let it ruin a nice dinner party.”

H  l  ne, dressed in a pink and white polka dot top over white capris, introduced the tall man dressed in white slacks and a tucked short-sleeved shirt who carried Fabienne, also pink clad, in one arm and a bag of toys and diapers in the other while H  l  ne cradled pans of food wrapped in dishcloths. “Beth and Arnie Stockwell, this is my husband’s Ukrainian brother, Alexei.”

Beth gazed at the light-haired man’s startling blue eyes and thought of her long-ago infatuation with Paul Newman. This man wasn’t as good-looking, though. His nose was pointed, his eyes too far apart, and his lips thin. Well, not everyone can have movie star looks.

“It is good of you to have me along with my brother’s family,” Alexei said. He scanned the large living area with its wall of windows looking out onto the balcony.

“We’re happy to have you,” Beth said. “Arnie, will you show Alexei and Fabienne to the living room while H  l  ne and I set out her awesome-smelling hors-d’oeuvres?”

“Glad to. Over here’s a blanket where you can set out Fabienne’s toys and we can watch her.”

“She might not stay there long,” Hélène said back over her shoulder as she followed Beth into the kitchen.

“It’s okay,” Beth said. “We’ve had grandbabies, so I knew to put the breakable things up high in case Fabienne gets curious. Oh, my. Your appetizers look fantastic. What are they?”

“This is a Provençal Vegetable Tart just out of the oven. It’s made with ingredients typically found in ratatouille—eggplant, zucchini, tomatoes, and onion, on a flaky crust with shaved cheese on top. I used French Gruyère. It’s hard to find here, but I was able to get it at a little cheese shop Viktor and I found. These are slices of a sausage that I make. And here we have some brandy-soaked fruit.”

“It’s so—so tantalizing.” Beth took another whiff of the fresh thyme, oregano, and basil aroma from the tart and popped a slice of sausage and then a brandied cherry into her mouth. “Mm, I had no idea you were such a gourmet cook.”

“Hélène is top chef in France and in America,” Alexei said, with an accent that sounded Russian to Beth’s untrained ear, from where he sat in a chair next to the toddler in the living room. “She loves to eat out often, as the French do, at fine restaurants, but she puts many chefs to shame with her cooking.”

Hélène’s cheeks reddened. “No, no. I *was* a chef, yes, but now I’m a wife and mother. I’ve made more baby food than hors-d’oeuvres the last two years.”

Beth picked up small plates and napkins while her guest finished arranging her food tray. “Let’s put this delectable food in here on the coffee table, and Arnie can serve drinks while you tell us about your chef career, H  l  ne. We’d love to hear about your experiences.”

Arnie delivered a glass of cold, dry Riesling to each of the four adults upon H  l  ne’s assurance that it was a perfect wine to go with the appetizers. Fabienne reached for her mother’s glass, and H  l  ne dug into the diaper bag for a sippy cup full of diluted fruit juice. The child thanked her mother in baby talk, gulped for a few seconds, and set the cup on the blanket, bending over and holding the cup with both chubby baby hands until it sat upright.

“Perfect manners,” Arnie pronounced. “We’ve seen kids grab cups from their parents and then throw them on the floor when they’ve had their fill.”

“Thank you, Monsieur,” H  l  ne said. “In France, children are taught to be polite but are given much freedom to explore and discover on their own. At least, that’s the way I was brought up.”

“You’re doing a fine job,” Beth said as she watched Fabienne sit back on the floor near her mother and uncle to play with some colorful building blocks. “I’d love to hear about your career as a chef.”

H  l  ne related how she’d learned to cook from her grandmother and decided to attend culinary school as soon as she graduated from

the lycée, or high school, at age seventeen. After two years, she began working with a series of professional chefs in Paris and became a sous chef by age twenty-one. Because of what she described as diligent effort and Beth interpreted as talent, Hélène was soon hired as head chef at a popular high-end restaurant in the third arrondissement, an area of trendy shopping establishments.

Beth bit off half of a flaky vegetable tart and closed her eyes for a second as she savored the texture and flavors. “Well, I can’t believe we’re lucky enough to have hors-d’oeuvres prepared by a Parisian chef. Our dinner will be so plain and simple in comparison.”

“Simple is best,” Hélène said. “It’s about the love and care you put into the preparations.”

“So then, how and why did you come to the United States,” Arnie asked, “and where did you work as a chef here?”

“Ah, that is where the story becomes interesting,” Alexei said.

Fabienne stood on her wobbly legs and toddled over to the man’s knees with two blocks she had managed to hook together. “Tan ’ou,” she said.

Alexei took the blocks and patted the little girl on the head. “Thank you for the gift, Fabienne,” he said and glanced at the child’s mother with a crooked smile. There was something about the look in his eyes that Beth couldn’t quite read. Was it longing? Did he want a family of his own? Could it be infatuation with his brother’s wife? Was he

trying to impress her with how well he treated her baby? Beth told herself to stop creating mysteries where they didn't exist. Maybe he was just a nice man with time on his hands to spend with his sister-in-law and niece.

Hélène nodded her approval in a proud mother way and continued her story with smiling eyes focused on her daughter. She told them she'd dated a man she thought she loved during the few free hours she could be away from her job at the Parisian restaurant, and then she found out he was married. She broke it off, but bitter feelings were affecting her work. Soon, she started reading and responding to ads in professional restaurateur journals for chef jobs outside of Paris and was hired by a French restaurant in Denver, one that needed someone to give its image a lift.

“The company arranged for my work visa, and I sold my belongings in Paris and found a small apartment in Denver. After I started working at the restaurant, business picked up a bit, but it was too late. The owners made the mistake of opening their expensive French bistro in an old, established neighborhood where people couldn't afford to eat out and, even if they could, were more interested in American hamburgers and fries. The restaurant lasted less than a year after I came over.”

“How did you meet Viktor?” Beth asked, smiling at Fabienne who came toward her with another of her block creations. She held out her hands to accept the gift and then held it up for everyone to see. “Oooo, thank you very

much. This is beautiful. You might grow up to be an artist.”

“Or, an architect,” Arnie said.

“Tan ou,” the little girl said.

Her mother whispered, “Mrs. Stockwell said thank you. You say de rien—you’re welcome.”

“Elcome,” Fabienne echoed. Beth leaned over and kissed the little girl on her forehead.

“Elcome.”

“For a kiss we say thank you,” H el ene said.

Fabienne looked confused and ran over to bury her face in her mother’s lap.

“Thank you and you’re welcome, merci and de rien—lots to keep straight. Right, Fabienne?” Arnie said. “I’m not sure I’ve got it yet.”

Fabienne gave him a sideways look from her mother’s lap, sat on the blanket, and went back to her serious building block enterprise.

“So, you asked how I met Viktor,” H el ene said.

She explained that Viktor’s job as a restaurant supplies marketer meant that he visited with managers and head chefs at upscale restaurants in his region. At the time she worked as head chef for the French restaurant in Denver, Denver was the center of Viktor’s region and also his home. The manager of her restaurant left all the decisions about kitchen supplies to her. Therefore, she met with Viktor at least once a month. At first. It became once a week as they became more interested in each other. Both of their schedules were hectic, but soon they found time to be together outside of work. By the

time the restaurant went under, they had moved in together—to save money and time traveling from one place to another, Hélène explained.

“And now,” Arnie said, “you are married and have a child. I’ve always wondered how the visa thing works. Can you still work as a chef? Did you have to get a new visa as the wife of an immigrant worker?”

Beth frowned to hint he was being nosy. Arnie raised his eyebrows in response—an innocent look that told her he was trying to find out more about her late-paying tenant in a roundabout way. Hélène seemed not to notice. Alexei kept his eyes on Fabienne, as if her pattering was the most interesting thing in the room.

“Viktor has a work permit from his company because he is a specialist in his field. Fabienne and I can live here since we are his family, but now I have a green card. I could be hired as a chef by another company. The green card allows me to work in the United States for ten years until I have to either apply for a new card or apply for citizenship, but I haven’t thought about getting a job since the baby was born.”

Arnie had refilled wine glasses while the visitor explained her U.S. status. When she finished, he sat down and asked, innocent-eyed. “It sounds complicated. Have the visa and permit process been expensive?”

“Not so much. Not yet, anyway. The companies have paid for the work permits.”

“We just noticed that you’ve been late with your rent payments over the past few months. It occurred to me that this visa business could be part of the problem.”

Beth felt aghast that Arnie had been so blunt, and in front of Alexei, too. She watched H el ene’s face redden. The young chef turned nervous eyes toward Alexei, who scooted forward in his chair.

“Viktor sends money to family in Ukraine,” Alexei said. “Sometimes expenses here are more, too, and he must assign each paycheck carefully. It is hard, as he works on salary and commission. You understand? But rent is priority. He has paid all, no?”

“He absolutely has paid every month,” Beth said in a cheerful manner with a quick sideways look at Arnie. “Thank you for the explanation about how the money is divided. We only have the one rental unit left, and we depend on the rent money. Now that we understand the reason for the late payments, we won’t be so worried that it’s not coming.”

Arnie smiled at H el ene. “You’ve had an exciting life for a person so young. Thanks for sharing. I’d like to hear your story, too, Alexei. During dinner, maybe. Should I start the grill for the chicken?”

As soon as they all assented, Arnie stepped around his chair and the coffee table, which had been pulled to one side to make room for the baby blanket. He headed for the balcony and almost trampled Psycho Cat. No one had noticed the big cat approach the group gathered around Fabienne’s play area. His tail

flicking, Psycho Cat dashed under the coffee table and into the middle of the blanket as Arnie stumbled across the room and caught ahold of the kitchen bar to steady himself.

“Vesther!” Fabienne grabbed. Psycho Cat’s tail ended up in her tight little grasp, and the cat turned an abrupt one-hundred-eighty degrees, freeing his tail and scattering the blocks. He leaped onto the seat and then the top of the easy chair Arnie had vacated. He sat there and licked the injured tail with a suspicious eye on the little girl.

The adults watched this quick series of events with their mouths open. They all, including Arnie back by the kitchen island, let out relieved puffs of air that Fabienne wasn’t harmed, but the little girl giggled, pushed herself up, and toddled to the chair with her arms out. “Meow, Vesther,” she said, her baby-toothed smile broadcasting her infatuation with her prey.

Hélène leapt toward Fabienne to pull her back, and Beth catapulted past the coffee table to the back of the easy chair to collect Psycho Cat. Her glass of wine fell over and spilled onto the table and the floor. Beth’s leather sandal slipped through the wine, and she went sprawling across the chair seat just as Hélène grabbed Fabienne away. Alexei jumped to his feet with a stricken look on his face, and Arnie rushed forward.

“Are you okay?” Arnie asked.

Beth pushed up to stand beside the chair. She glanced around and saw Hélène with Fabienne, both wide-eyed, Alexei standing

beside them with his mouth open, and Arnie looking quizzical. Psycho Cat sat on the back of the chair staring at her with a slow blink. Beth's gaze prompted everyone else to look at him, and Psycho Cat curled around and lay sideways with his head and one paw down over the back of the chair, his green eyes inscrutable.

If there was one thing Beth did regularly, it was trip and fall. She'd learned to brush herself off and keep on keeping on. She pulled her shoulders back and reached out to pet her cat.

"I don't think Psycho Ca..., I mean, Sylvester, would hurt Fabienne. He doesn't have front claws and has never bitten anyone that I know of, but I wasn't sure what he would've done had Fabienne climbed up and pulled his fur. I can just put the kitty in the bedroom and shut the door."

"Non, s'il vous plaît," Hélène said, "Fabienne needs to learn how to behave around animals. There are many people who have cats and dogs. I will sit with her and Sylvester while you prepare the food. We will be fine."

Alexei came to sit on the blanket with Hélène and Fabienne, and they began gathering the scattered toys. Arnie opened the balcony doors and walked out to start the grill. Beth got a cleaning rag and mopped up the spilled white wine. "If you're going to spill wine," she said half to herself, "dry, white wine is the way to go." She put her green rice with mushrooms casserole in the oven to warm and

then sat in Psycho Cat's chair to watch. Psycho Cat jumped off the back and plopped into her lap. She stroked him, and the play group looked up when they heard his oversized purr. Alexei displayed a thin smile and excused himself to the balcony where Arnie was brushing glaze on the chicken.

During dinner, Fabienne played with a baby doll. Beth left the balcony door open so the toddler could roam in and out and visit the table whenever she wanted. It meant she had to watch that Psycho Cat didn't sneak out and jump on the handrail, but the cat behaved. The evening breeze felt good, and everyone praised the moist grilled chicken and Beth's accompaniments. Fabienne ventured out to eat a bite of each and returned to her pretend world.

After dinner, Fabienne came to her mother's lap and stuck her thumb in her mouth. H el ene cuddled and rocked her until the little one was fast asleep and could be safely laid on the blanket in the living room where they could watch her. Beth kept her eye on Psycho Cat, just in case. But as she watched, the big cat curled up next to the child and proceeded to nap with her, back to back. When Alexei moved to sit closer to H el ene and the conversation grouping, the cat made an inexplicable growl deep in his throat as he watched the man. He closed his eyes most of the way, as cats will do, and finally relaxed after Alexei had settled into his chair for a bit.

It wasn't until Beth served the Peach Melba with vanilla ice cream that Arnie said, "So,

Alexei, you haven't told us yet. How did you get to America?"

"My story is short. Viktor sponsored me and had a job lined up here in Kansas City for me. It is with a delivery service. I deliver food supplies to restaurants every morning."

Beth wanted Alexei to tell them why he came and what he foresaw as his future, but it didn't happen. Instead, he asked to use the bathroom, and they watched as he crept noiselessly around the sleeping duo on the living room floor and headed for the hallway opposite the kitchen.

"I think Alexei is a good man. He also sends money to the family in the Ukraine," H el ene said.

The breeze, the dessert, the wide view of the neighborhood, and the blazing oranges and pinks of the summer sunset provided subjects for the remainder of the evening's convivial conversation. Psycho Cat and Fabienne remained peaceful until H el ene and Alexei gathered the sleeping child and all their paraphernalia to leave. The minute Arnie opened the hallway door for them, the cat zipped between legs and over to the penthouse door where he reared up and pawed at the doorknob.

"I don't know what's gotten into him," Beth said. "He did that this morning. We haven't even met the people who live in that luxury condo. Are you acquainted with them, H el ene?"

"Viktor met the man in the elevator, or maybe in the lobby. Only the man and not his

wife. They have in common that they immigrants, and they...”

Alexei walked to the elevator. “We’d better get the little one to bed.” He seemed to be in a hurry all of a sudden.



## CHAPTER 5

### **THE BALCONY**

**B**eth and Arnie sat out on their north-facing balcony that evening until it became dark enough to see the lights of Brookside and the city beyond. Every once in a while, Beth stood and stared at the wall of the penthouse balcony next to them. That balcony also faced north toward the lights of the city, but she'd never seen anyone there—only the young girl and the man on the south balcony. Of course, it would be hard to see anyone out there because of the cement walls on the sides. Walls built for safety and privacy, she was sure. She wondered which balcony she and Arnie would use most if their condo filled the whole side of the building and had north and south balconies like the penthouse.

“Did you hear H  l  ne say the folks who live across the hall from us are immigrants? Wonder where they’re from,” Beth said to Arnie.

“It’s hard to tell. You’ve seen more of them than I have. Alexei sure didn’t want to talk about them, I noticed.”

“Wasn’t that a weird reaction? He cut off whatever H  l  ne was about to say.”

“That wasn’t the only action I found strange about Viktor’s Ukrainian brother, as they call him. When he

came out on the balcony to talk to me while I grilled, he started pumping me for information about how many properties we own, what our retirement income is, and if we have a second home somewhere. It didn't sound like merely a cultural difference about what kind of personal information we share with other people. It sounded like he was casing the joint. You know? Finding out when we'd be out of town and how much money we have. I kind of expected him to go off looking for a safe, or something."

"Whoa. Like when he went to the bathroom. He could have searched the bedrooms."

"Well, good thing we don't keep a safe in there."

Beth giggled. "I know. Nowhere to keep my diamonds and wads of money. Darn."

"And my gold bullion," Arnie deadpanned.

"On the other hand," Beth said, "Alexei seemed like a good guy with Fabienne and H el ene. Viktor's ten years older than his wife. Alexei could be the younger brother caring for his young sister-in-law and niece. Maybe he's merely curious about Americans and how they make a living and save for retirement, because he's starting out with a low-paying delivery job. I guess we shouldn't be so hard on him."

"We'll give him the benefit of the doubt," Arnie agreed.

The next morning, Beth slept late, took a slower-than-usual walk on the Trolley Track Trail, showered, and went to the kitchen to hand wash her wine glasses and good serving dishes from the night before. She had to be on alert when she did that job, what with her acknowledged tendency to drop dishes.

Arnie had left early for his normal Thursday morning golf outing and had taken off early. With the condo to herself, Beth arranged the living room furniture back to the configuration she liked, stood back to admire her new surroundings again, and then

sat down to read a mystery. Later she meant to get busy unpacking the last few boxes.

Psycho Cat curled up behind her on the sofa as she read. Soft sunlight filtered in through the north-facing French balcony doors. Even though she'd left one door open a crack for fresh air, the condo's altitude prevented the distant street noise from vying for attention with her sleuth's current jam. Beth's muscles tightened as the fictional suspect stalked closer and closer to the closet where the protagonist was hiding.

A muffled scream? Beth's head popped out of her book. Had she imagined it? It seemed to have come from somewhere outside. She slipped onto the balcony. All looked quiet down below. Unsettled, Beth rolled her eyes and shook her head trying to rattle some sense back into her brain. She strolled back to her spot on the sofa. She enjoyed losing herself in the stories she read, but this was ridiculous.

Beth retrieved her book from under Psycho Cat's paws. The cat liked to claim anything she left around. She had just nestled in again, with Psycho Cat now content to rest his head on her lap, when she heard another scream. Although still faint, as if insulated by walls, this one sounded closer and higher pitched, and it went on and on. She sat transfixed, listening for a moment or two, and then she threw her book aside and ran, with Psycho Cat streaking between her legs, into the hallway. Empty. The indistinct screaming ended, but not before Psycho Cat was rearing up against the door of the penthouse. Beth put her ear to the door, heard nothing, and then pounded and waited. No one appeared. Finally, she lifted the heavy cat and lugged him back into the condo with him squirming all the way.

What a time for Arnie to be gone! What should she do? She called down to the lobby desk to tell Al what she'd heard and ask him for help, but no one

answered the phone. She'd have to ride down and find him. It occurred to her to call 911. But what would she tell them—that she thought she heard an indistinct sound from across the hall that sounded like a scream? The girl she saw could be in there playing a video game or something. No. Better that someone in charge would go to the penthouse to ask if there was a problem.

Beth went back into her own condo to get her keys when she heard police sirens. She ran to the balcony again and looked over the railing to see three cars screech around the corner, their red lights swiveling and sirens blaring. Two more skidded to a stop at the curb in front of the building. Uniformed officers left the lights flashing and scuttled to the condo building's front doors. She saw an ambulance weaving through traffic as it approached from farther down the street.

Her anxious ride down was quiet, but the elevator doors opened to a lobby full of chaos. Beth could see poor Al standing by the door to the pool patio with his arms out, trying to control a group of people jockeying for position to get a peek over his shoulders or under his arms. A policeman stood outside the double doors that led to the back parking lot, barring the exit. Ms. Helper talked to two policemen with her arms crossed and a grim look on her face. Beth marveled that they'd gotten her out of her office.

Herman Houser, her new friend from the ninth floor, looking shaken, separated from the crowd and approached Beth. "I don't want you to worry that this kind of thing occurs here all the time, young lady. Nothing like this has happened before since I've lived in the building. And that's been a long time."

"Oh, Mr. Houser..."

"Herman."

"Herman. What's going on? What *did* happen?"

“A fellow fell onto the sidewalk that leads to the pool patio. I saw it happen, or part of it. I was sitting in my living room when he fell right past my windows. Must have been from the tenth floor, or maybe from the roof.”

“Oh, my, gosh! That’s horrible. What did you do?”

“Well, I’ll tell you, I ran out to my balcony to look down. By the time I got there, it was over. Pretty rough, even for me, and I served in the Korean War—glad you didn’t have to see it. Anyway, I called nine-one-one, but someone had already called. I came down here when I saw the police cars pull into the back parking lot—to be a witness if they need me. Anyone who has windows and a balcony above the patio might have seen it happen, though.”

Beth nodded. “I came because I heard what sounded like screams and then saw the police show up. My windows look out to the front and the west side of the building, though, so I didn’t see the fall like you did. That must have been awful. I wonder how it happened.”

“A-hem. No telling.” Herman’s wrinkles seemed to grow thicker when he frowned, and his shaggy white eyebrows almost covered his eyes, making him look like Walt Disney’s version of Grumpy.

Herman stood beside Beth watching the activity with a dour look and muttering. “Told *you* not to worry, but it looks like it’s getting dangerous around here. First break-ins. Now someone falls to his death. Yellow police tape around our patio. We’re going to have interrogators in the building questioning everybody. Where’s the peace and quiet...?”

Ms. Helper followed someone out the back doors, possibly a detective. From the body language, it appeared she was receiving instructions about what part of the area would be off limits to residents while the investigation proceeded and how people would get to the cars parked in the back parking lot. Al, the

doorman, looked more relaxed in his position by the patio door since the crowd had dispersed into small groups gossiping about the grisly event and what it might mean to their cozy, convenient community. Exaggerated rumors about the deceased and his unfortunate end would soon be spreading, Beth was sure.

Two officers filtered through the groups gathering accounts. Beth told a policeman about the faint screams she'd heard and gave him her contact information. Herman told them the approximate time he'd seen the fall. Then, Beth and Herman headed for the elevator together, leaving the other shocked and gawking residents to their speculations.

Beth pushed the nine and ten buttons. On the ride up, she told Herman about the usual routine she and Arnie experienced when trying to get to the tenth floor. His worried face turned even cloudier.

“Have you told the manager?”

“Yes, but she's been no help.”

Herman squeezed her arm before he stepped off onto the ninth floor without the elevator having stopped between the lobby and there. “I'm sorry you moved in to experience elevator trouble, break-ins, and such a horrifying death. Things will get better. This has always been a good place to live.”

A minute later, Beth stumbled over the elevator track on her own floor while she fumbled with her key ring. She thought about the teen she'd met at the edge of the break-in on the eighth floor and reflected how lucky she was not to be a student in today's noisy, multimedia, multitasking world. She'd probably sit on her earphones, forget to hit the send button to turn in her assignments, and knock a laptop to the floor when rushing to the next class.

While she opened her condo, Beth gawked at the penthouse door halfway down the hall thinking about the people she'd seen on the balcony, Psycho Cat's

interest in that door, and the fatal fall. Just as she put one foot over her threshold, the door down the hall opened and Carl Rinquire, a local police detective, stepped out and looked right at her. She had met him when he headed the search for her niece who went missing from her sixth-floor rental condo some years before.

Beth gasped. "Detective Rinquire."

"Mrs. Stockwell? Are you visiting one of your rental units?" he asked without moving away from the penthouse door. It remained open, as if he still had business inside.

Beth realized he must meet hundreds of people in the course of his investigations, and yet he remembered her name. Those were qualities of a good detective, she was sure.

Beth walked toward him. She wanted to be polite, of course, and go closer so they wouldn't have to shout down the hall. Curiosity, however, was the biggest motivation for her to move toward the detective. She came close enough to be able to glance inside the door while she answered his question.

"No, I still rent out our condo on the sixth floor, but Arnie and I live here now. We bought this condo to downsize since we don't have kids at home anymore. Uh, I guess you're here because of the body on the patio."

"That's right," the sturdy, balding detective said in his stoic way. "We're determining how much of this area must be barricaded until our investigation is finished. Does anyone live in the third condo on this floor?"

"It's owned by a businessman who uses it only a few weeks out of the year. No one has lived in it since we moved here, but that was only a couple of weeks ago."

Beth put a hand to her mouth as an obvious thought struck. “Does your being here mean you suspect the fall wasn’t an accident?”

“We’re investigating that possibility. Please stay home for the next hour or so. I need to ask you some questions about what you saw or heard.”

He turned back toward the penthouse door. Beth craned her neck to sneak a look inside and saw a uniformed female police officer approach with a roll of yellow tape. She also glimpsed a dark-haired woman about her own age seated in a wheelchair. Rinquire gave her a warning look.

“I’ll be right here,” Beth said, gesturing toward her condo and backing away.

This time she caught Psycho Cat before he had a chance to streak through the door when she opened it. “No, Ol’ Buddy, you don’t want to mess with the law. They have a job to do.”

Forty-five minutes later, Arnie stomped through the door and almost knocked his wife over. He looked confused, and she happened to be right in front of him.

“What’s going on? Why didn’t you call and tell me the whole building is surrounded by cops and our own floor is blocked off?” He asked in a louder voice than necessary.

“Well, I...” Beth searched for her reason. She’d been pacing back and forth, opening the door a crack every few minutes to see if anyone was in the hallway and waiting for Detective Rinquire to appear to interview her. “I was waiting until I knew more. I didn’t want to interrupt your golf game and lunch.” She paused and squinted at him. “Besides, I didn’t expect you until about one-thirty or two this afternoon. It’s just past twelve.”

Arnie took a long breath. In an effort to calm down, Beth thought.

“Okay, sorry. We were all too hot to enjoy eating without taking a shower. So I came on home,” Arnie said in a voice now more concerned than cranky. “So do you know what’s going on? I had to show my I.D. before I could get on the elevator, wait for the elevator to stop three times to let a bunch of people off, and then show the I.D. again before I could get off on this floor.”

Beth started to tell him what she knew, starting with the mystery story and screams she’d heard while she was reading—condensing a story wasn’t her strong suit—when the doorbell rang.

After a nod toward Arnie, the first words out of Detective Carl Rinquire’s mouth after Beth invited him in were, “What can you tell me about Eduardo and Rosa Ramos?”

“The people who live in the penthouse?” Beth said.

“The deceased and his widow,” Rinquire said.

Arnie stood beside Beth and put his arm around his wife’s waist as he learned about the day’s events. Beth remembered to tell the detective about seeing the man who was probably Eduardo Ramos hovering in a dangerous position over the balcony railing near some hanging plants.

“When I found out about the fall, I figured he stepped up onto his stool to water the plants again and fell accidentally. Is that a possibility?”

“Maybe.”

“But evidence suggests otherwise?” Arnie asked.

“Mr. or Mrs. Stockwell, did you see or hear anyone come or go from the elevator or stairwell this morning before or after you heard the screams?” Rinquire asked.

“No. Like I said, I washed up the breakfast dishes and read, and Arnie was at his weekly golf game. He missed the whole thing.”

“Rosa Ramos said she heard male voices on the balcony late this morning. The alleged visitor, someone

with a Russian-sounding accent, was gone by the time she discovered her husband had fallen.”

“You mean she didn’t hear him scream when he fell?” Arnie looked skeptical.

“It’s a big apartment. Mrs. Ramos showed me where she went to sit in front of the TV in the family room on the other side of the apartment, to give her husband privacy, she said. She claims to be hard of hearing and has to keep the volume high. The kids were in there with her at their computers with earphones on.”

“The kids?” Beth said.

Detective Rinquire lifted an eyebrow. “Guess you didn’t know that either? Grandchildren are staying with them. Twins. Lucas and Lucia Flores. They corroborated her story.”

After the detective left, a brief thought of Alexei’s curious reaction the previous evening when they brought up the folks in the penthouse crossed Beth’s mind. But he was Ukrainian, not Russian. Anyway, he drove a delivery truck during daytime hours.



## CHAPTER 6 **THE NEIGHBOR**

“I’m skipping my walk today,” Beth told Arnie the morning after the balcony incident.

“Why?”

“It makes me nervous that there might have been a murder across the hall. And, I don’t know, coming and going through a police barricade?” She shuddered.

Arnie left for his golf game with no hesitation. When he came home, he told Beth the elevator brought him directly to the tenth floor—no stop on the way.

“Amazing,” Beth said. “It took a fall from the balcony and a police investigation on this floor to get the elevator fixed.”

“At least it works for now. The officer by the elevator told me they won’t be here much longer.”

That afternoon, Beth ventured into the hallway to visit with the young officers who were there to guard the crime scene and the family. She talked to one of them about his girlfriend problems and took them homemade snacks. The male officer scarfed down the glazed meatballs and cheesy popcorn she offered. A female officer, who expected a long, dull night of sitting by the elevator, accepted two chocolate caramel brownies in the evening.

No one could give Beth any information concerning funeral arrangements or how the deceased man's family was coping. One guard suggested it took longer to make final arrangements when there was an ongoing investigation.

"He probably meant the body is being autopsied and can't be released yet for burial," Arnie said.

"It's awful," Beth said. "Those twins in there waiting to hear if their grandfather's fall was an accident or a *murder*."

She wanted to do something for the family, but the guards wouldn't allow her to take food or condolences to the mourners. Beth thought the widow and grandchildren would have had to move out while the penthouse was a crime scene. However, her new police friends told her the deceased's family had nowhere else to go. With special permission from Detective Rinquire, they were allowed to use the large penthouse apartment, except for the living room and balcony, until the investigators finished. Groceries were delivered downstairs, and police brought them up.

Beth wished she'd see Detective Rinquire again so she could ask him more questions. Did he think Eduardo Ramos was pushed? Did he suspect a man with a Russian accent? Was there evidence suggesting who that man was? Why would someone want to kill Mr. Ramos? Was suicide a possibility? Why was the family so private, or even secretive?

The next thought brought a lump to her throat. She'd heard the second scream, the long, wailing one, a few minutes after the first one. Who screamed later? If it was Mrs. Ramos, how could a woman in a wheelchair lean down over the tall balcony rail? She hated to think it, but it could have been the children screaming.

On Saturday morning, Beth's sixth-floor tenant, Viktor Lutsenko, came to the door. When Beth answered, he looked over his shoulder before stepping

inside. The light-haired, well-built man, who usually exhibited an aura of confidence, looked rattled.

He handed her a check. "I am sorry to be late with rent payment, Mrs. Stockwell. You have been very patient. Thank you."

"It was our pleasure, Viktor." Beth waved the check. "I'm glad to get this, but don't worry about being a little late. Your brother explained that you send money to your family and can't always be sure when you will be earning commissions."

Viktor frowned. "My brother?"

"Alexei. Isn't he your Ukrainian brother? He came to dinner with H el ene and Fabienne Wednesday evening. The subject of the rent payment came up, and he explained why you can't always get it to us on time."

"Ah, Alexei."

"Alexei, yes." Beth smiled. Ukrainian brother meant brother, right? Or did it? For brothers, they didn't look much alike. Same general size and coloring, but Viktor had won the good-looking genes, for sure.

Psycho Cat moseyed over to rub against first Beth's and then Viktor's legs. Viktor stooped over to pet the kitty, and Psycho Cat went into his "Oh, yes, feels good, keep it up" capers. The man obliged.

"Nice cat, Mrs. Stockwell. He keeps you good company, yes?"

"Very good. Sometimes it seems as if Arnie and I are here to keep *him* company, though."

Viktor pulled the door open to leave, but he looked concerned. He stuck his head out to peer around the door frame before he stepped into the hallway.

"Don't worry about Officer Greg," Beth said. "He's really nice. It's the police guard's job to ask everyone for identification when they come to this floor. It's because of the investigation into our neighbor's fall from his balcony, you know. Arnie and I had to show ours, too."

“Yes.” Viktor looked at Beth and nodded, but he pressed his lips into a grim line. Then, he squared his shoulders and marched to the elevator without looking at the guard.

Beth wondered if the Ukrainian had a negative view of law enforcement learned during his youth or maybe during the present-day Russian-backed separatist movement.

Late Saturday afternoon, the barricades were removed, and Beth talked on the phone to her sister, Meg, about how unsettling it was to know the family across the hall was in mourning, and yet no one had been allowed to visit. Meg encouraged her to be a good neighbor by dropping by to offer help.

After the conversation, Beth made double her usual amount of lasagna, a dish she knew her grandchildren loved and might also appeal to the children across the hall. She wrapped one of the pans in dish towels and took it to the penthouse door. The doorbell button brought no response. After she knocked several times and waited, Beth backed away from the door wondering if she would have to take her lasagna back home.

It was then she heard a bump and scuffling noises on the other side of the door. She gazed at a small eyehole, smiled, and waved.

“Hi. I’m Beth Stockwell from across the hall. I brought a pan of lasagna for your dinner.” She hoped the person inside could hear her. On the other hand, she had shouted like crazy. She hoped she wasn’t so obnoxious that the person might think her rude—or demented.

She waited with her smile set in place and the pan of food held toward the peephole. Her arms tired, she brought them down, almost giving up again, when she saw the door handle turn. The lady Beth had observed from the hallway when speaking to Detective Rinquire

pulled her door open a crack and peeked through. Beth could see just enough to realize the woman sat in her wheelchair behind the door. The chair prevented the door from opening any wider unless Mrs. Ramos rolled out of the way. Beth stood waiting for a greeting, but none came.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Mrs. Ramos,” Beth said, “and I’m sorry we had no chance to meet before the tragedy. Please accept this pan of lasagna and my condolences for your family. I would have brought something sooner, but the police...” She motioned toward the elevator across from the door where they stood.

To Beth’s surprise, Mrs. Ramos said nothing. No invitation to come in. No smile or frown. The heavy but well-groomed woman stared at the towel-wrapped pan of food with no comment, but she didn’t close the door or turn down the gift. Beth stood stiff and quiet, like one of those ceramic chefs people display in their kitchens, trying to think of something else to say or do.

The explanation, when it hit, loosened her up and brought a smile. Mrs. Ramos couldn’t speak English. Her build, coloring, and name said it all. She must speak only Spanish. Beth hated that she knew so little Spanish, just what she’d learned by listening to Sesame Street with her kids when they were young, and most of that she’d forgotten. She reached forward with the pan.

“Por favor, señora Ramos,” Beth said.

She pulled back the towels to show the dish of lasagna. The aroma of oregano and basil filled the air. Beth pointed at the dish and then at Mrs. Ramos. The lady’s eyes grew bright, and she reached for the pan with a slight smile.

“Gracias,” she said.

“De nada.” Beth backed away with a smile. “Adios.”

Mrs. Ramos closed her door with a tiny wave and the wrapped pan sitting on her lap. Beth bounced back to her door with a big grin on her face, so proud of herself for remembering how to say a few words in Spanish. Psycho Cat became the lucky recipient of extra petting and brushing because of her good mood.

Arnie came home a little later looking dirty and sweaty from spending the afternoon helping a friend replace fence pickets after playing golf with him all morning. "It smells great in here," he said.

"I made lasagna today, and it's in the oven staying warm for dinner."

"Wow. That's great. I could eat the whole thing right now, I'm so hungry. What's the occasion? You don't usually want to bake on a warm day like today."

"I took some to our penthouse neighbor."

"So you met the family, at last?"

For the first time since she'd returned from the penthouse visit, Beth's face fell. "No. Now that I think of it, I didn't see any children, just their grandmother. It felt as if she was being secretive. She kind of blocked the door with her wheelchair."

"But she took the food?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's a start. You can only do what you can do. I need to take a shower, and then I won't make a secret of eating your lasagna."



## CHAPTER 7

### **DENTED DOORS**

There was no activity Beth could see in the hallway or from the trail where she craned her neck toward the penthouse balcony each day. She invited her sister and brother-in-law for dinner one evening and included Herman Houser. Meg and Paul took to Herman, whose initial grumpiness with Beth and the condo break-ins were the main topics of conversation before dinner.

“Have you heard anything more about how your neighbor fell from the balcony?” Paul asked during dinner.

“Paul,” Meg said, glancing at Herman, “that’s not a nice topic to bring up while we’re eating.”

“It’s okay,” Herman said. “I was a witness, you know.”

“Really?” Meg said. “You mean you saw him lose his balance or get pushed or—you know—jump?”

“No, I couldn’t see the balcony. But I saw him fall past my window. He was screaming aplenty. I’d say he didn’t jump on purpose.”

“I heard the screams, even all the way on the other side of the building,” Beth said.

“It’s dreadful,” Meg said. “I wonder if the police have concluded their investigation.”

“We haven’t heard anything,” Arnie said, “but then, I don’t know how we’d hear.”

“I always thought there was something funny about the people in that penthouse,” Herman said. “The way they hide out up there—there could’ve been something illegal going on that caused the man to get pushed off the balcony.”

“We live directly across the hall from the penthouse, and we haven’t noticed anything that would suggest illegal activity,” Arnie said. “In fact, the only person I’ve ever seen at that door was a young man delivering groceries one day when I was on my way to the office.”

“Well, I’ve noticed things throughout the years, living one floor below and all. Sometimes, when the people who own that other condo on this floor are in town, they’ve ridden the elevator with Ramos, and he won’t say nothing. And the past couple of years, I’ve seen that Ramos lady get off on my floor and ride around in her wheelchair.”

“Mrs. Ramos could have been visiting someone on your floor,” Beth said. “Heck, people probably wonder about me when I walk Psycho Cat around the building.”

Beth looked down at her plate while she cut a piece of the juicy steak Arnie had grilled for dinner. After she put it in her mouth and looked up, everyone at the table was looking at her with crooked smiles on their faces. Beth turned a little pink as she finished chewing.

“Oh, yeah. People *do* wonder about me wandering around the building—perfectly innocently taking my kitty for walks. See what I mean?”

Everyone chuckled, and Meg changed the subject. “Beth told me your grandchildren from Oregon are coming to visit in a couple of weeks,” she said to Arnie.

“Yep. Wyatt and Missy. This is the first time they’ve been allowed to fly without their parents. Those two are so busy with their careers that they can’t get away

for a week very often; so we suggested the kids come alone and give them some time to themselves.”

“We fly out to Oregon a couple of times a year, usually,” Beth explained to Herman, “but this year the move took up the time and money. Anyway, our granddaughter, Alana, who lives here in town, will be staying for a couple of days, too. They’re all around the same ages. Wyatt is twelve, Alana’s eleven, and Missy is almost ten.”

“Sounds as if you’ll have your hands full,” Herman said.

Despite Herman Houser’s ominous statements earlier, he made pleasant conversation the rest of the evening, and Beth considered her dinner party a success. She took a gift of leftover barbecued pork and potato salad to the penthouse the next day. It was accepted in the same way her lasagna had been. She tried to offer to pick up food from the store for the family, but Mrs. Ramos didn’t respond to her offer. Where were those grandkids who were supposed to be staying there? Were they slipping out to do the shopping, or was it all being delivered like Arnie said? She’d keep an eye out in case she was needed.

“A list is what we need,” Beth told Arnie that afternoon as she lifted the lid of her roll-top desk to get a pen and paper.

Beth sat and started her list with headings titled *Places*, *Activities*, and *Meals* for each day of the week. Now that her grandchildren’s visit was closing in, Beth felt compelled to think of all the things the three children might enjoy doing.

She and Arnie had been throwing ideas into the air, but Beth relied on written lists. Maybe it came as a result of her years as a property owner and manager. She’d kept lists of rental units, renters, contractors, payments, and receipts. She’d never remember all their ideas for her grandchildren’s visit without a list.

“Both kids can swim pretty well,” she said. That can be one of the activities every day since this miserable heat wave is supposed to continue all next week. She looked up and wrinkled her nose. “I hope I can go down to the pool with them without imagining the body that landed right outside the patio fence.”

“You’ll be too caught up watching the kids to think about that,” Arnie said.

Beth chuckled. “You’re right. It’ll be so much fun having them here. Let’s see, we might take them to a movie one day and to LEGOLAND. The new aquarium at Crown Center is open now, too. “Don’t forget the simple things. They always enjoy going to the playground and to Loose Park to feed the ducks.”

“Oh, I think they’re past that stage. Last few times I was with Alana, she was all about fashion and make-up, not about playing in the park. An eleven-year-old acts older these days, and the other two are pre-teens, too, you know.”

“You’re right. Hard to believe.”

“I expect I’ll take the girls shopping one day while you and Wyatt go throw the ball around. Maybe he’d like to hit some balls with you at Topgolf.” Beth put on her innocent look. “Or you and Wyatt are certainly invited to go shopping with us.”

“Sure. We could look at jewelry while you girls check out the latest clothing styles, or the other way around.”

As if he wanted to join in the teasing, Psycho Cat appeared from nowhere and jumped directly onto the desk on top of Beth’s writing paper. He batted the pen out of Beth’s hand, and it flew halfway across the room near where Arnie sat in his easy chair. Beth stood and put her hands on her hips.

“You rascal! Get down.”

Psycho Cat sat on his haunches and blinked at her.

Beth turned one side of her mouth up. “He thinks he’s going to get out of trouble by charming me.”

Arnie came to the desk with the errant pen, hauled the big cat into his arms, and stroked him. A motor boat engine running in the living room couldn't have sounded louder than the cat's purr.

"Come to think of it, Psycho Cat hasn't been out today," Beth said. "The list can wait. I'll get ready and take him for a walk."

She came out of the bedroom a few minutes later wearing walking shoes, Psycho Cat's leash in her hand, and a thoughtful look in her eyes. "Do you think there's any connection between the lock-picking thief, the elevator that wouldn't come to the tenth floor, and Eduardo Ramos's fall from the balcony? You always say you learned in insurance that there's no such thing as a coincidence."

"But not true in this case. The building is large—lots of people mean lots of problems."

"Still, I'm going to walk Psycho Cat in the building and examine those marks on the condo doors to see if I can figure anything out. Maybe I'll run into someone who was robbed and get a clue. The lock-picking joker could have been messing with the elevator, too, just for laughs."

Arnie put the cat on the floor so Beth could attach the leash. "Are you still thinking about those break-ins? There hasn't been another one for several weeks as far as we know. But looking at doors seems harmless enough, I guess. Not much danger from someone who steals paper clips, pens, and cookies—unless it turns out to be a Cookie Monster."

"Ho, ho, very funny," Beth said with one eyebrow raised. "Oh, speaking of cookie monsters. I'll add cookie making to the list of activities with the kids. We'll decorate them and take some to Fabienne, some to Mrs. Ramos, a few to Herman, and package some to go home with the kids, and..."

"And eat some of them?"

"Of course."

“Sounds like an all-day job. I might have to stay out of the way that day. But it does sound like a better activity than nosing around the building chasing clues to catch a petty thief and solve an elevator glitch, especially when you’re thinking about connecting those things to a possible homicide.”

Beth stood up from her desk to regard her husband and saw no humor on his face. She stuck her phone, her keys, a small notebook, and Psycho Cat’s badminton pen in her pockets, pecked Arnie on the cheek, picked up the leash, and headed for the door. “I’m not going to do anything *dangerous*. You know me. I’m just curious. My door checking is something I can do while I exercise Psycho Cat. If I really happen to find a clue or figure out anything, I’ll tell Detective Rinquire. The tenth floor is the elevator prankster’s target, and the break-ins have probably been reported to the police. Anyway, how much sleuthing can I do with three kids to entertain next week?”

Walking toward the elevator with the cat pulling the leash tight as he dashed ahead, Beth felt subdued. Arnie never wanted her to get involved. He was an analytical kind of guy and didn’t rush into things the way she did.

Then too, it did seem a little pointless to look at the damaged doors. She’d seen a few of them—some scratches near the door handles and shallow dents in a couple of them. No way to get fingerprints, even if she knew how. What kind of clue could she hope to find? Oh, well, like she’d told Arnie, it’d be something to do. She picked Psycho Cat up and plopped him into the elevator when he headed for the penthouse door again.

They exited the elevator and strolled through the lobby as they headed for the hallway leading to the first floor residences. A group of ladies sitting around a coffee table chuckled and smiled as Beth led Psycho Cat past them. An older man stopped and rubbed

Psycho Cat's ears while the feline sat in docile appreciation of the attention.

On their ramble down the hall and back, Beth saw only one door with any kind of scratch, and that scratch was near the top, more than likely from a wire on a wreath or door hanging. It made sense. Breaking and entering on the first floor would be hard to execute without drawing the attention of the door guard or someone lounging in the lobby, even late at night.

On the second floor, one door had the telltale marks of the lock-picking. There was a shallow dent several inches above the bottom of the door and some scratches in the finish several inches toward the center above that. It was a good thing Psycho Cat didn't have front claws, or there would be more scratches. He reared up, pawing against the door.

Why hadn't she thought to bring a measuring tape? Beth looked at her hands and clothing and caught sight of the cat's leash. She used the end of it to measure from the bottom and one side of the door and marked the distances on the leash with the pen she brought while the cat sniffed at the door and talked to her in short *meows*.

"I know, Sylvester, my love. I'm being a little detail-oriented. But who knows, close observations and measurements could turn out to be an important clue. Maybe someone's metal boot toe made the dents, and we'll spy a pirate with metal toe tips and a hook for a hand. Besides, I'm not as obsessed with these doors as you are."

Psycho Cat looked up at her with round eyes. "Meow." She guessed he agreed.

Four doors were scratched and dented on the third floor. Beth measured each while Psycho Cat pawed at them. All of the dents and scratches were the same distance from the floor but different distances from the sides of the doors. Sometimes there were two sets of

dents, and when there were two, they were the same distance apart. Beth tried to visualize what kind of instrument the lock-picker could have used. A crowbar Arnie used in building projects came to mind.

“No, that’s silly,” she said to Psycho Cat. “Why would a person use a crowbar if the lock is being picked? The door would just open with the handle after the lock is disengaged.”

They found two damaged doors on the fourth floor. While they were standing in front of one of them, the door opened, and a heavy-set, sixtyish woman with bright, dyed-red hair, tight capris, a horizontally striped T-shirt, and giant white sneakers burst out, almost knocking her over. Beth felt her cheeks grow hot.

“Sorry,” she said in the most engaging way she could muster. “I was looking at the marks on your door. I’ve seen several like that in the building.”

“You must be new,” the lady said with an understanding smile. “Those were made by our own building break-and-enter thief.”

“I heard something about that. What was stolen from you?”

“Only some sewing scissors I left out with some quilting material I was working on at the time. At first, I thought I’d misplaced them, but I’ve never found them since the thief was here—had to buy new ones.”

“Did you notice anything else? Like drawers gone through or broken items?”

“Not much of anything. My throw rug by the door was bunched up, and of course the marks on the door. Oh, and I forgot to mention the cracked blue plate that was on my kitchen counter. Not very important since it was going into the trash, but I never found it anywhere in the condo, so I guess it was taken. Crazy, huh? I understand the condo association maintenance committee is planning to hire someone to refinish the doors, but they want to wait until the break-in artist is

caught so they won't have to have them fixed again later."

"Good idea. I'm sorry you were a victim. My name is Beth Stockwell, recent tenth floor move-in."

"I'm Teresa Bell, but everyone calls me Tinker. I'm on my way to my aerobics class, or I'd stay and talk longer." She reached down to pet Psycho Cat. "You have a lovely kitty. Willing to go for walks with a halter and leash, no less."

Beth smiled, relieved the woman hadn't insinuated she might be the thief returning to the scene of the crime like Herman Houser did. "Nice to meet you, Tinker."

All the stolen items were small and easy to grab, Beth reflected. They weren't valuable items but were important to the victims. Could the thief have stolen the items for that reason? Could the person have known the little girl would miss the last cookie her mother had saved for her snack, the paper clips set out on a work desk, the special quilt-cutting scissors?

There were four more dented doors on the fifth, and two on the sixth floor. The measurements all showed the same patterns. On their way past H el ene and Viktor's door, Beth saw no dents, but Psycho Cat paused and refused to move when Beth pulled.

"Okay," she said, "you're right. We haven't seen our renters since last weekend. We'll just say hello." She rang the bell and waited, but no one answered.



## CHAPTER 8 **THE ARREST**

**B**ack in her condo, Beth measured the lengths she'd marked on the cat leash—on every door, dents about nine inches above the floor and scratches about fourteen inches. Whatever good that information would do. Nevertheless, she wrote down the condo numbers and measurements on a list and put it away in her desk.

That evening, Psycho Cat slept stretched along the cushions on the back of the sofa, looking as if his ten-story jaunt took all the jauntiness out of him. While Beth and Arnie navigated the kitchen preparing a large salad for dinner, a supreme effort to make up for their overindulgence at their dinner party the night before, Beth shared the small amount of information she'd gained from inspecting the dented condo doors.

"The cops probably know about these break-ins and already have those measurements," Arnie said.

"Oh, darn." Beth slapped her forehead with the heel of the hand that held her mixing spoon, and Arnie pulled a couple of pieces of lettuce and green onion out of her hair.

"Oops. Thanks. It just hit me I didn't ask Tinker whether she called the police." She rinsed and dried the salad spoon.

“Tinker?”

“Her real name is Teresa, but... It doesn't matter. Maybe someone called the police early on but not lately, since the investigation is on-going. Like the doors. Tinker said the condo folks won't get the doors fixed until the culprit is caught.”

Arnie nodded. He looked thoughtful, as if he wanted to say more, but Beth's phone rang. She laid the spoon beside the bowl of greens with exaggerated care, giving Arnie a sideways grin, before she went to her desk to pick it up. She glanced at the caller I.D. and called back into the kitchen. “It's H el ene.”

A few minutes later, Beth returned to the kitchen feeling shaky. “H el ene sounded desperate. She said Viktor has been arrested! And she asked if we know of a lawyer. I said we know of at least one. I hope you don't mind. I told her to come up, and we'd look up the name. I'll put these salad fixings in the fridge for the time being.”

While she stashed food and piled a few crackers, some cheese cubes, and grapes on a plate for the toddler, Beth looked up and saw Arnie watching her with a wry look. She hadn't given him the opportunity to respond, had she?

“I guess I could have offered to go to her instead of dragging you into this. But you know more about lawyers and such.”

Arnie raised his hands. “It's okay. We're here to serve.”

When she arrived, H el ene looked pale, and her eyes were red, but, the dutiful mother, she carried a diaper bag and playthings for Fabienne. The little girl toddled beside her mother in silence as if she knew something was wrong but couldn't guess what. After a few minutes of shyness while Beth and Arnie ushered them in, Fabienne spied the cat on the back of the sofa. She reached out with one chubby hand and released her hold on her mother.

“Vesther.”

“Sylvester is taking a cat nap right now,” Beth said, eager to avoid another tail-pulling fiasco. “He had a busy day. But if we put your toys on the floor in front of the sofa, maybe he’ll wake up to see you playing and will visit you. Is that okay?”

Fabienne nodded with a baby-toothed grin on her face and pulled her mother over to the area rug by the sofa with her bag of toys. H el ene made sure her daughter was settled before she turned to Beth and Arnie.

“Now, tell us what’s going on,” Arnie said.

H el ene stole a sideways glance at her daughter and sniffled. Fabienne jabbered to her toys and to Sylvester in her own toddler language, a mix of English, French, and Ukrainian. H el ene sank into the easy chair that Arnie indicated, and Beth set the tray of snacks on the coffee table. She handed a small stem of Pinot Grigio to H el ene who took it with a tiny smile. “Merci,” she said but then set the glass on the table and pressed both hands together in her lap.

“I don’t want to impose,” she said, “but I don’t know where else to turn. Alexei doesn’t answer his phone. I left a message and a text. But he probably doesn’t know a lawyer for Viktor. An immigration lawyer, perhaps, but...”

“It’s okay,” Beth said. “Maybe we can help?” She looked at Arnie.

“What kind of lawyer do you need?” Arnie asked. “What happened? Did the police say what Viktor is accused of?”

H el ene answered in a choked whisper. “Murder. The policeman said Viktor was being arrested for the murder of Eduardo Ramos, the man who fell from his balcony, the same man who gave money for Viktor’s family.” She raised her chin and gazed at them both in turn, her tear-glazed hazel eyes wide. “He looked confused and terrified to go with them. He looked at

me with *tears* in his eyes and told me to tell Alexei to find someone to help. He said, ‘I don’t know why this is happening.’”

Hélène placed her hands over her face. Her apparent efforts to hold in the sobs produced a series of nasal gasps that gained Fabienne’s attention. Beth sat, not knowing what to say, while she watched the little girl wiggle between her mother’s knees and peer upward.

“Mama?”

Hélène moved her hands to Fabienne’s shoulders and tried to smile. “Mama is okay. Go play now while I talk to our friends.”

Fabienne sat on the floor with an arm around one of her mother’s legs and a thumb in her mouth. She scanned the adults with worried eyes. On the other side of the room, Psycho Cat jumped with a soft thump off the sofa and crept close to the toddler, rubbing his furry side against her arm before he stretched out beside her with his chin on his legs, his green eyes looking empathetic.

“Oh, you poor thing. You must be beside yourself,” Beth said to Hélène and then cut her eyes to Fabienne, knowing that little ones understand more than people think. When she got up from her seat to give Hélène’s shoulders a hug, Fabienne looked up at her. Beth knelt down and gave Fabienne a hug, too.

“Do you know why they think Viktor did it?” Arnie asked in a disbelieving tone of voice.

“I don’t know. I tried to find out, but they would only tell me he’s their primary suspect and that they have enough evidence to take him in. Do you think they’ll put Viktor in prison? I need to help him.”

“They might keep him in a holding cell tonight. You’re right, he needs an attorney,” Arnie said. “It may be too late today to find someone, but my brother-in-law may have a recommendation of an attorney who

helped his family in the past when our niece was accused of a crime.”

Hélène gazed down at Fabienne and spoke softly. “We don’t have extra money, but I’ll find a way to pay.”

“I believe the court will appoint a free attorney, if you can’t afford one,” Beth said.

“But would a person working for free do a good job? No, I will work to help pay for an experienced attorney. Maybe we should call your brother-in-law?”

Beth and Hélène sat listening as Arnie called for contact information and then called the office of Richard Montorlee, the attorney Paul recommended. He left Hélène’s call-back number.

Fifteen minutes later, while Beth speculated with their renter about whether she should expect a phone call from her husband that evening, Hélène’s phone buzzed. She glanced at the caller I.D. “I don’t recognize this number. Maybe it is Viktor calling from the police station.” She answered and then slid the phone away from her mouth to whisper, “It’s the lawyer.”

Hélène took her phone to the kitchen for privacy, but Beth could hear her tell the attorney how she got his name and answer questions about her husband’s situation. Beth sat on the floor beside Fabienne to help the youngster remember to be gentle with Psycho Cat and told her what a good girl she was being while her Mama was busy.

Hélène strode back into the seating area with a tight mouth. “Mr. Montorlee will go to the station and talk to Viktor tonight, and he says it’s important that he be present when Viktor is questioned tomorrow. He told me to stay home until he calls later with more information.” She headed for Fabienne’s diaper bag and scattered toys.

“You’re welcome to stay here and have dinner with us while you wait. He can call you here as easily as at home,” Beth said.

“You both are so kind, like having my own parents near. But you have done enough by helping me find a lawyer. He sounded like he knows what he’s doing. Thank you. I need to get Fabienne ready for bed and... and prepare for the phone call.”

Beth put her hand on H el ene’s arm. “Try to stay calm, and get some sleep tonight. You’ll need to be strong and rested for Viktor.”

“Do you think Viktor could have shoved Mr. Ramos off the balcony?” Beth asked later as she picked at her salad.

“The cops think so,” Arnie said, “and we don’t know him well enough to judge.”

“Well, H el ene was broken up about the arrest. She seems to believe he’s innocent.”

“Uh huh.”

“What do you mean, uh huh?”

“I tend to believe her. But she never said he didn’t do it. She didn’t give him an alibi. She only asked for help finding a lawyer.”

“Detective Rinquire did say something about Mrs. Ramos and one of her grandchildren hearing someone with a Russian accent on the balcony before the acci...before the fall. A Ukrainian accent could sound Russian, I guess.”

“Everyone deserves the best defense. We’ve done what we can. For H el ene’s and Fabienne’s sakes, I hope Viktor is innocent.”

“I wonder what happened to Alexei,” Beth mused. “He has the Ukrainian accent, too. And it’s stronger than Viktor’s.”

“It’s up to the investigators and to Mr. Montorlee now, Betsy. You’re not thinking of getting involved in this, I hope.”

Beth looked at her plate, stuck a large forkful of salad into her mouth, and mentally rolled her eyes. Arnie called her *Betsy* only when he was teasing or being directive. His last statement was certainly the latter.



## CHAPTER 9

### THE EVIDENCE

Beth called H el ene the next day. She told herself she wanted only to provide support, like H el ene implied she would need from a mother figure. True enough. Deep down, though, she knew her interest was partly curiosity. Arnie would say she was sticking her nose where it didn't belong. But Arnie was off playing golf. So...

"No," H el ene responded to Beth when she asked if her attorney was able to have Viktor released while the case was being investigated.

"You mean, not yet?" Beth asked.

"No. Mr. Montorlee came to see me this morning after he and Viktor met with a judge. There's much evidence that incriminates Viktor. The judge thinks he's a flight risk and needs to be held at the jail. It's because he is Ukrainian, I think."

"I'm so sorry. But what kind of evidence do they have that would allow them to keep him?"

"There are eye witnesses." H el ene's voice sounded monotone, as if she had no energy to do more than state the facts. "Someone on our floor—the attorney wouldn't tell me who—saw Viktor heading for the elevator about twenty minutes before Mr. Ramos fell to his death. And someone in the Ramos family saw him,

or heard him, in their condo. They also found Viktor's fingerprints on some of the balcony furniture during their investigation."

"Well, that doesn't prove Viktor pushed the man. My goodness, one time I saw Mr. Ramos up on a chair or stool watering his hanging plants on the balcony. He could have fallen accidentally after Viktor left, if Viktor was really there that day. Do you remember him leaving to go to the Ramos's condo that morning?"

"He left at the time the witness saw him go to the elevator. I only remember because all the commotion of the sirens happened about half an hour later, and I wished Viktor was there to help calm Fabienne. He had just returned from a business trip out of town and had to make some calls to restaurants in Kansas City. He stayed around for awhile that morning to play with Fabienne and talk to me since we hadn't seen him all week. When he left, he said he was going to make one call and then eat lunch before he finished his jobs that day."

Beth started pacing while she talked. Her brain cells were whirling, and she almost stepped on Psycho Cat. His meow and flight into the bedroom didn't stop her from trying to wrap her mind around the fact that H el ene couldn't give Viktor an alibi. Still, the evidence they had wouldn't keep Viktor locked up, would it?

"Did Viktor have any reason to make a visit to Eduardo Ramos before he left the building?" she asked.

There was a pause. Beth looked at her phone to make sure she still had a connection. "H el ene, are you still there? Am I being too nosy?"

H el ene sighed so heavily that Beth could almost see her chest heave through the phone. "You see, that's the worst part—the evidence that convinced the police detective, Detective Rinquire, of Viktor's guilt. I guess it convinced the judge, too."

"What evidence?"

“The letters the police found when they searched the Ramos condo and ours. Letters about the money Mr. Ramos was giving to Viktor each month to send to Ukraine.”

“Well, Mr. Ramos was wealthy and wanted to help Viktor send money to his family. He probably empathized because he was also an immigrant. How could that be evidence against Viktor?”

Beth stopped pacing and took her phone to the balcony. Down below, parked cars lined the street in front of the Brookside shops. People strolled along the sidewalks and sat outdoors at cafés. Children romped on the playground. Two women competed in a rousing game of tennis. The green tree tops, colorful flowers, and the leisurely pace proclaimed peace and contentment. But in this building, a lovely family’s happiness was being torn to shreds.

“And why would Viktor kill someone who was giving him money?” Beth asked.

This time Beth heard a sob, and H el ene’s voice lost its robotic drone. “The letter...the...the letter...” H el ene sniffed, and Beth could hear her blow her nose. “The letter they found among Mr. Ramos’s personal effects—Mr. Montorlee said it appeared to be from Viktor—was threatening. I...I didn’t read the letter. The lawyers have it. But Mr. Montorlee said it told Mr. Ramos that his family’s lives would be in danger if he didn’t continue to supply money.”

Beth spoke slowly, letting it all sink in. “Oh, I see. So they think Viktor came up here to get money after he sent the letter, fought with Mr. Ramos when he still refused to comply, and pushed him off the balcony?”

“Yes.” It was barely a whisper. “But Viktor wouldn’t do any of that. He’s kind and loving and...and good to people.”

“Are they sure the threatening letter was written by Viktor? I mean, a person wouldn’t want to send evidence that could be used against him.”

“I asked that, too, but the attorney said he saw the letter. It was typed but hand signed. And the paper had fingerprints on it. They took Viktor’s prints and found out some of them were his.”

After a few attempts at soothing H  l  ne and assuring her that Mr. Montorlee would provide the best defense, Beth volunteered to babysit Fabienne that afternoon for a couple of hours so H  l  ne could visit her husband at the jail. She hoped Viktor would be able to explain. Most of Beth’s babysitting time was spent reading her mystery book while Fabienne napped. *Who Censored Roger Rabbit* had enough humor to help take her mind off the mysteries in her condo building, the latest a very dark, sad one.



## CHAPTER 10

### **PLANS**

Arnie consulted part time for the large insurance company where he had worked most of his career. That's where he'd headed earlier that afternoon, and he was still gone when Beth returned from babysitting. She'd gotten no more information from H el ene that would help her know whether Viktor would murder someone.

She and Arnie had prepared for their upcoming grandkids' visit. All she needed to do now was buy groceries—kid foods and ingredients for recipes she thought they might make together. Beth looked over her list of activities. She'd written a notation about finalizing plans for the kids to spend time with her sister, Meg, and Meg's grandson, Todd.

Beth had a soft spot for Todd and his mother, Adrianna, who had rented the sixth-floor condo before she married. In fact, she was why Beth knew Detective Rinqure. He had helped rescue Adrianna when she was confronted by a deranged killer in that condo. But that was years ago.

Beth called Meg. "How ya doing, Big Sis?" Beth grimaced the minute the words were out of her mouth. Meg hated to be called Big Sis. Sensitive about her age and a little about her weight, too, Beth knew. She

hurried to gloss over the mistake. “Hey, Meg, we need to discuss what we’re going to do with the kids next week and what day would be best. Do you have some time now to talk?”

“No, Tiny, Insensitive Sis. My bridge club is here.”

Beth chose to ignore her sister’s dig. “Can you meet me at the Roasterie tomorrow morning around ten? We’ll have coffee together and make plans. Besides, there’s a situation here in the building, and I want to hear your take on it.”

“Ten at the Roasterie. See you then.”

After rebelling during her teenage years against Meg’s advice after their mother’s death, Meg was now the first person she thought of when she needed to vent or talk through something that was troubling her. Arnie, of course, heard most of it, too. But in instances like this one, when she was concerned about someone else’s problems, he was apt to make remarks about her tendency to put her nose in the wrong places. That wasn’t what Beth wanted right now. Maybe Arnie became so fed up with problems at work that he didn’t want to hear more at home. Meg was more patient and understanding. She helped Beth think her problems through.

The next day, from the patio of the Roasterie, Beth sat in a metal chair at one of the small, round tables and watched her sister approach. Beth had grabbed the space early, carrying a book to occupy her waiting time. The popular coffee shop’s seating was in high demand. She chose the patio since a soft rain the night before had taken some of the humidity out of the air, the temperature was still in the low eighties, and the sky was as blue as—as Alexei’s eyes.

Her brain cell synapses, lately mired in the tar pit of H el ene’s woes, leapt to the differences in Viktor’s and Alexei’s appearance. But here came her sister, bigger boned, darker coloring, taller, and hazel eyes to

her blue ones. Beth had always wanted to have Meg's straight, shiny hair instead of her unruly blond curls. Siblings didn't have to look alike. Maybe the men were half-brothers.

Meg saw her wave and changed direction toward the patio. "Are you sure it'll stay cool enough for us to sit out here?" she asked.

"It's frigid in there. I think they keep the AC set way down so business people in suits will be comfortable. Maybe if you take your sweater off you'll be comfy out here?"

"Okay, but if the sun comes over to this side before we leave, I'm scooting inside."

Meg folded her summer sweater over the back of the open chair. She moved the chair to the left and sat down. Then, she stood and moved the chair to the right farther than it had been before, rearranged her sweater, placed her purse on the table, and sat. Beth watched it all with amusement in her eyes. If she'd been able to move the table, Meg would probably have done that, too. Meg looked down at the chair legs and started to stand again.

"Good grief, Margaret, we're going into the shop to buy our coffee and muffins. Are you going to rearrange everything again when we get back?"

Meg gave her an annoyed look, and they left the sweater to hold the table while they went to the counter to order. Beth chose black fresh-roasted coffee and a blueberry scone while Meg hemmed and hawed and mumbled about calories but finally got an iced caramel latté and a gooey chocolate brownie. Beth made no comment.

Back on the patio, Meg set her treats on the table. Walking right behind her with her eyes on her cup to make sure the coffee didn't splash out, Beth stubbed her open-toed sandal on the chair leg as Meg moved it again. After a stumbling balancing act any circus clown would be proud of, Beth set her cup on the table

and shook her head with a self-deprecating smile at the people at nearby tables who were staring. She sat and frowned at Meg.

“What?” Meg said. “There was a glare from that angle. You shouldn’t have walked so close behind me.”

While they ate and sipped, Beth opened her notebook to the activities she’d plotted for her grandchildren. After twenty minutes of casting about for the best day and place to get the kids together, they decided to go to the Kansas City Zoo on Tuesday morning. Todd was a ball of fire but wore himself out fast and then got cranky. The zoo had a train and benches.

They talked about planning another outing for that afternoon but decided that even if the kids weren’t tired, the adults would be. They’d all go back to the condo building and let the kids use the pool in the afternoon while they sat on the side and watched. Beth closed her notebook and sipped her lukewarm coffee. This coffee tasted good even after it got cold.

Meg leaned forward and lowered her voice, “Okay, so what’s the *situation* in the West-Gate building? I’ve been dying to hear. Did you find out you have a horrible, grumpy neighbor? An affair going on and you don’t know whether to tell the wife? Or, I know, a condo thief is stealing the residents blind!”

Beth’s eyes opened wide at the last remark.

“That’s it. You think you know who it is, but he’s a Vietnam War Vet down on his luck, and you don’t want to get him in trouble if you’re wrong about him being the burglar. You need me to help you spy and catch him in the act so you can turn him in.” Meg sat back with a toothy smile, as if Beth might roll on the ground laughing at her wisecrack guesses, as if she needed to be congratulated for her wit.

“Nice try, Miss Marple. But you know what? There really is a lock-picking petty thief who’s been breaking into the condos for several months. The person hasn’t

taken anything of much value, but people are worried about their vulnerabilities. I haven't come up with a suspect or even an idea yet about who's doing it. Arnie thinks it's a kid or kids.

"That's not what I wanted to talk to you about, though. You remember the man who fell from the penthouse balcony? Now the police think it was murder."

Meg looked serious. "Your neighbor was killed? You aren't in danger, are you? Do they have suspects?"

"I don't think we're in danger. I never met the gentleman who fell...or was pushed to his death. I do know the man who has been arrested for the murder, though. He and his wife H el ene rent my sixth-floor condo."

Meg's mouth gaped open, but she had no response. Beth filled in the events of the past few days.

"I'm sorry you've had all these problems with your tenants." Meg shook her head and looked incredulous. "There were those druggies in one of your duplexes, one duplex basement that took you three days and two gallons of bleach to clean up, the fossilized skeleton in the attic, and now a murderer? Do you want my advice about what to do if the wife—you said her name is Ellen—can't pay the rent now that her husband is going to prison?"

Beth winced and then reached over and squeezed her sister's hand. "Thanks, Meg, for thinking of my problems first, but those are secondary right now. Let me explain. First of all, I'm worried about H el ene. She has a toddler, and I'm not going to kick her out. I'd rather help her find a job and a babysitter so she can stay in the condo and pay the lawyer. The only other person she has to help her is her husband's Ukrainian brother, and I don't think he has much money."

When Beth explained about H el ene's French chef experience, Meg perked up. "That's an awesome background. There are several good French

restaurants around the city. Maybe one of them will have an opening for a cook.”

“A chef.”

“I’ll ask my friend, Kelly, a teacher in the school where I taught. Her husband is a chef. He might have some inside information.”

“Thanks, Meggie. I appreciate that, and I think H el ene will, too. But that’s only one of the problems that need a solution.” Beth frowned and took several seconds to formulate her thoughts.

“Out with it. I’m here to be your sounding board.”

“And furniture arranger?”

“That, too.”

“Here goes. I’m concerned about the family in the penthouse, too. There are two children and their grandmother in a wheelchair. I may have seen the kids recently in the lobby headed for the pool patio door. At least, the girl could have been the one I saw on the penthouse balcony one time. I call her Rapunzel because of her super-long black hair.”

“You’re getting off message, Beth.”

“Sorry. I’m just sorting this through. Anyway, the twin boy and girl looked to be around my grandchildren’s ages—ten, eleven, twelve—not old enough to be taking care of themselves and a woman in a wheelchair who doesn’t appear to speak English.”

“Maybe the woman is quite capable. Many disabled people are.” Meg spoke from experience. She’d taught the physically disabled for a few years during her long career.

“I hope that’s the case, and I hope the grandfather provided for them. I have no idea what their status is now. I do want their grandfather’s killer to be punished, and... The thing is I find it hard to believe Viktor is guilty.”

“Why? You said they have scads of evidence against him. Eyewitnesses, letters, fingerprints, no alibi.”

“I know, but H el ene believes in him. He seems like a nice, hardworking guy devoted to his family. And...Psycho Cat likes him.”

“Well, that proves it. The man must be innocent—because Psycho Cat approves of him.”

Beth smiled and spoke with conviction. “Sylvester has a sixth sense about people.”

“Maybe you should call him Psychic Cat.”

“I guess it’s just a gut feeling I have about the man.” Beth told Meg about the threatening letter the police found with Viktor’s fingerprints and signature at the end. “Couldn’t someone swipe a piece of paper Viktor handled and forge his signature?”

“Sure,” Meg said. “Kids in middle school forged their parents’ signatures sometimes. I don’t know if they would pass crime investigation scrutiny, but teachers and office personnel fell for them all the time. Don’t the eye witnesses make it a done deal, though?”

“I don’t know exactly what those people said or if they could have misconstrued what they saw, but I want to find out if there’s someone who had a better motive for murder than having Mr. Ramos withdraw voluntary contributions to Viktor’s family in the Ukraine. It makes no sense—a man helping his relatives would be grateful for what he had been given and understand when his donor needed to help his own family.”

“Didn’t you say Viktor is ten years older than Ellen—I mean H el ene?”

“Yeah. So?”

“So maybe his needy relatives in the Ukraine are another nuclear family, another wife and child, or children, he left behind when he came to the U.S. for work. He could be so devoted to both families and need that extra money so much that losing it infuriated him.”

Beth jerked her head up and opened her eyes wide at that thought. Then, she crinkled her face into a big grin. “Meg, you have such an imagination.”

Meg shrugged her shoulders.



## CHAPTER 11

### THE PENTHOUSE CHILDREN

“I think Viktor Lutsenko was framed—like Roger Rabbit,” Beth told Arnie at dinner.

Arnie looked at Beth as if she had finally slipped down a rabbit hole, where Roger was one of the bunnies. “You’re grabbing at straws, Beth, because you want Viktor to be innocent. Who or what is Roger Rabbit?”

“He’s the character in the book *Who Censored Roger Rabbit?* It’s the mystery that was made into the movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* All the evidence against Viktor seems circumstantial. Even if the letter from him was real, it doesn’t prove he pushed Mr. Ramos.”

“You read too many mysteries. The police must have enough evidence to keep Viktor in jail. Richard Montorlee is a good lawyer. Admit it, the eye witness or eye witnesses in the penthouse must be the damning evidence.”

“Hm.” Beth wrapped spaghetti around her fork and stared off into space. The witnesses—that would be a place to start. She’d have to take another casserole to the penthouse and see if she could talk to the kids. They’d surely speak English. She’d look up how to say “May I speak to the children?” in Spanish. She stuck

the forkful of pasta drowned in her homemade marinara sauce into her mouth.

Arnie was watching. He put an elbow on the table and shook his fork at her. "You're not scheming how to prove Viktor was framed, are you? I thought you were going to let the police handle all this."

"Mmmmm. Mmmmm." Beth nodded her head and pointed at her full mouth.

The next morning, Beth woke early with her self-imposed projects for the day running through her mind. She must have been dreaming about all she needed to do, because she felt heavy, as if already behind schedule. Before she could make coffee and take a shower, Psycho Cat climbed her leg with his front paws and meowed with his little begging sound.

"Okay, Sylvester Kitty, I'll walk you as soon as I eat my yogurt and get dressed. I'll need some energizing before I tackle the shopping and cooking today."

Funny how people think animals can't talk to humans. The cat didn't seem to understand her as well as she understood him, though. He continued to climb her leg while she made coffee, and then, when she sat at the bar to eat a Greek yogurt and ignored him, he scooted into the bedroom to jump on Arnie.

"This is my morning to sleep in. I don't have an appointment until ten o'clock," Arnie shouted from the bedroom.

Beth heard the door slam shut and saw Psycho Cat pad back into the living room from the hallway and head toward the kitchen. She shook her head at him and finished her little meal. Psycho Cat lay by the front door with his chin on his paws watching Beth's every move.

On the way to the elevator, the cat veered off toward the penthouse door. Beth pulled at his leash. "What is it about that door, you silly cat? The only other doors you bother with are the ones with dents. Is there

someone or something in there that has to do with the break-ins?” She stood for a minute, contemplating. There weren’t any dents or scratches, and the door was fitted with a small metal box above the handle that looked like a security gadget of some kind. Come to think of it, she’d heard some extra clicks before Mrs. Ramos had opened the door to her casseroles. She looked down at Psycho Cat. Could that box emit a signal that only the cat could hear?

In the lobby, Al, the security guard, greeted Beth with another one of his cat-walking jibes. “I know a goldfish that needs some exercise. Would you walk it too?”

“Ho, ho.” For once, the cat sat at her feet while she talked to Al for a few minutes. “How’s the guarding business going? Have you broken up any fistfights between lobby sitters lately?” They both looked toward the gray-haired residents already establishing their cozy corners for their morning coffee klatches. Many of them looked as if they’d have trouble forming a fist.

Al chuckled at her comeback zinger, but Beth thought about Eduardo Ramos, a man of retirement age, who had some kind of fight with someone. She didn’t want to think it was Viktor. Her little joke may have been funny a few months ago, but now...

“Seriously, Al, have you heard any more about the Ramos family and if there will be a funeral or memorial service for Mr. Ramos?”

“No, I haven’t heard about a service. I see the grocery deliveries come into the building, and I send them to the tenth floor, but as far as I know, Mrs. Ramos is okay in her wheelchair. She seems to still be cooking her own meals, if the deliveries mean anything. It’s hard to cook when you’re in mourning. I remember my mother trying to do that after my dad died. She finally gave up and ate prepared meals most of the time.”

Psycho Cat grew restless when someone came into the building and waved at Al. “Oops. Time to go. See you, Al.”

Interesting. Al said nothing about the grandkids. He didn’t know for sure that children lived in the penthouse, even though he must have seen them in the lobby like she did. Maybe he thought they were visiting whenever he noticed them, which meant the building manager, Ms. Helper, probably remained clueless, too. Beth renewed her promise to herself that she’d speak to the kids and try to find out if all was well. She’d take a dish to them today before her grandkids distracted her from thinking about it.

Beth took a shorter than normal walk on the Trolley Track Trail and stopped behind the condo building to crane her neck toward the penthouse deck. No one was standing there.

With a long list of groceries that would be too heavy to walk home with, she drove to the grocery store and then to the New Dime Store in Brookside. She wanted some little fun items the kids could play with. She chose a couple of balls for the pool, some whirligigs for the balcony, and three yo-yos.

While Arnie went to the office, Beth spent the day cooking her marinara, braising chicken, and baking cookies. She used part of the chicken to make a big pot of chicken noodle soup. The cooking aromas from the basil, oregano, and thyme in the marinara, the poultry seasonings in the soup, and the chocolate in the cookies made the condo smell delicious but feel overheated. Beth closed the blinds on the patio doors and turned the temperature down a degree.

By late afternoon, Beth had everything done, and she decided it was as good a time as any to deliver food to the condo. She looked up the words she wanted to use and wrote out the Spanish along with her own phonetic pronunciation key. With two jars of

her chicken noodle soup and a bag of chocolate cookies in a sack, Beth rang the bell across the hall.

“Buenos días, Señora Ramos,” Beth said after waiting at the door while clicks and clunks sounded from inside.

The woman smiled up from her wheelchair and repeated the greeting. Beth considered it their first conversation. Then, she read the sentences she’d written out. She meant to say she would like for Mrs. Ramos’s grandchildren to meet her grandchildren, who would be visiting for a week.

When she finished her slow, painful reading of the Spanish she’d put together with the help of the Internet, Beth looked up and cocked her head in anticipation of an answer of some kind. Rosa Ramos looked at her with incomprehension for a moment and then fired off a barrage of Spanish. Beth took on a deer-in-the-headlights demeanor as she tried to pick out a word or two. She felt like Fabienne must feel when people spouted words in different languages all around her.

“Scuzi me, I don’t understand,” she said.

Giggles broke out in a part of the room hidden by the door. Then she heard a “shush,” also from someone she couldn’t see. Beth spoke into the room beyond the wheelchair.

“Hi there, I’m Mrs. Stockwell, Beth Stockwell, from across the hall. I guess my attempt at Spanish was really bad, huh? I was trying to tell your grandmother that my grandchildren are coming to visit, and I’d like for you to meet them. They’re about your age and would love to have other kids to play with.”

At first, nothing happened except another spew of Spanish from Mrs. Ramos as she backed the wheelchair away from the door. The woman grabbed at the tipping sack of food on her lap and lost her hold on the door. It swung open and revealed the young, dark-haired girl Beth called Rapunzel who took hold of the

handle and started to push the door shut. In mid-push, she stopped, pulled her grandmother's wheelchair out of her way, and stepped into the doorway to face Beth.

"No, no, Lucia," Rosa Ramos sputtered.

"Lucia, don't!" came a young voice from behind the door.

"I want to meet your grandchildren, Mrs. Stockwell," Lucia said, "and we want to thank you for the meals you bring."

Rosa Ramos shook a finger at her granddaughter. "Lucia Flores, you know you not speak to strangers," she said.

"Mrs. Stockwell is our neighbor," Lucia replied with conviction.

The grandmother shrugged her shoulders and rolled toward what looked to be a large dining/kitchen area on the other side of the massive living area. She muttered under her breath in Spanish as she went. The only words Beth understood were "Ay, ay, ay." Lucia followed with her eyes and then turned back to Beth.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Lucia," Beth said. "I didn't mean to upset your grandmother. I don't think she understood what I was trying to say."

"She'll be fine. She understands English, but she doesn't speak it very well and often won't try."

Beth noticed the girl stood stiff with her arms at her sides and a polite but nervous smile on her face, as if she was new at speaking English to "strangers," as her grandmother put it. This wasn't the time to ask all the questions Beth wanted to ask. It was a breakthrough, though, and she hoped she wouldn't scare this youngster away. No more questions about Grandma and none about Grandpa right now.

"I understand how your grandmother feels. You heard how badly I speak Spanish. And you are very welcome for the food. These days, I have only my

husband and myself to cook for. It's fun to make a full recipe and have some to share.

Lucia nodded and gave Beth a shy but more authentic smile. She clasped her hands in front of her body and changed her weight from foot to foot as a younger child might. "Do you make meals for your big cat?"

"Oh, you've seen Psyc... I mean, Sylvester? No, I buy big bags of cat food for him. Do you have a pet?"

"No." It was said in a low, unhappy whisper.

"Well," Beth said in a cheerful way, "it's a ton of trouble to have a pet on the tenth floor. I'm so glad you want to meet my grandchildren. Wyatt is twelve years old, and his sister Melissa, or Missy, is almost ten. Are they close in age to you and your brother?"

"We are both eleven years old."

"That's great. I have another granddaughter, Alana who is also eleven. She'll be here part of the week, too. They'll love to have some kids around. I'm afraid their old Grandma and Grandpa will get a little boring after a while. Wyatt and Missy will arrive tomorrow before lunch. By later in the afternoon, they'll probably be ready to go play in the pool. Will you ask your grandmother if it's okay for us to come over around three-thirty so I can introduce my grandchildren? Then, if you'd like, we can go swimming."

"We... or at least *I* will meet you at the pool. My grandmother lets us go sometimes." She reached for the door. "I'll ask her to be sure."

"Good. I hope to see you on the patio at three-thirty tomorrow, and tell your brother that Wyatt would love for him to come, too."

The girl nodded and closed the door. Beth could again hear the sounds that must have been locks clicking into place. She walked down the hall to her door with a tiny frown on her face, wondering how she could find out why the children were kept hidden and if they needed any help. Which one of them had been

the witness who saw or heard the man with Mr. Ramos before he died? Did the witness see the man (she refused to think Viktor) push Mr. Ramos?

Meeting Lucia was a start. Beth would just have to be patient.



## CHAPTER 12

### **GRANDFATHER'S RULES**

“The girls get to stand closer,” Missy said. “Grandpa is taller than you, and Wyatt is taller than Lucia and me.”

“Good point, Missy,” Beth said. “We’ll stand two giant steps closer.”

Wyatt stood in the pool with the small blue beach ball cradled in his arm. “Doesn’t matter, we’ll beat you anyway. Right, Grandpa? Lucia, you’re the guest. You should shoot first.”

Lucia gave Wyatt a shy smile, took two steps away from the side, and threw the yellow ball at their target, the center of a colorful plastic ring floating on the opposite side. The ball bounced off the edge of the ring, and Lucia swam the short distance to retrieve it for the next shooter. Beth motioned for her to hand it to Missy.

“Good try, Lucia.” Wyatt threw his ball, and it stayed inside the ring.

“One point here,” Wyatt shouted as he splashed over to get the ball.

Beth smiled. Her tall, skinny grandson, with the strawberry blond hair and cute, freckled face, had always been competitive. When he was younger, the competitiveness had led him to sulk or explode when he

didn't win, but he'd learned to be supportive of teammates and complimentary to opponents as he got older. It didn't hurt that he won more often than he lost and could afford to be generous with his praise.

After a rousing, sloshy twenty minutes of moans, cheers, and a bit more whining from Missy, Beth slipped and splashed face first into the pool. She caught her breath. "Okay, the score is close. I'm going to sit under the umbrella. You guys are on your own."

"I'm with Grandma," Arnie said. "You three can keep playing, if you want. Start over with the scoring."

Beth and Arnie sat at the table for several minutes watching the kids play in the pool and cheering each time a ball stayed in the target. The kids were throwing wide, and interest seemed to be waning when Wyatt suggested they race. Since there were only four other people at poolside and none of them in it, they had the whole pool to themselves. All three children started off at the shallow end, but Wyatt and Lucia took the lead from the start. Missy swam as far as the plastic float, put it around her middle, and began playing in the water. The older children swam side-by-side for several strokes, but then Lucia surged ahead. When she reached the end, Lucia touched the cement, turned like a fish, and swam past Wyatt on her way back. She made it to the starting point several seconds before he did.

"Wow. How'd you learn to swim like that?" Wyatt asked as he rubbed the water from his eyes.

"My grandfather taught us—my brother and me. He lived by a lake in Peru when he was young, and he was the best swimmer in his province. Lucas and I learned to swim in this pool when we were two or three years old. I practice every summer from the time the pool is opened until it's closed for the season."

"Jeez, you'll be a shoo-in for your high school swim team when you get older."

If there was a response, Beth couldn't hear it. Rather, Lucia glided smoothly back into the water and swam toward the other end. Wyatt shook the water from his ears and splashed in after her.

"Would you look at that?" Beth said in a low voice to Arnie. "Wyatt bested by a girl, and a younger one at that. He seems to be taking it well, though. Maybe he's a little smitten."

Arnie grinned. He loved all of his grandchildren, but Wyatt was his special buddy, being the only boy. "The kid has class."

"I'm a little disappointed Lucia's brother—I heard her call him Lucas—didn't come down. I wonder if he's as fun as his sister. She's shy, but she loves the activity, I think." Beth shaded her eyes with her hand and gazed at the side of the building. From her angle, she could see only the bottom, enclosed side, and a bit of the front railing of the tenth-story balcony. There was a shadow behind the rail. Could it be Lucas watching them have fun in the pool or just a planter or a chair? Was it where Eduardo Ramos went over the side? Beth shivered in the ninety-two-degree heat.

Wyatt organized a game of keep-away next and put himself in the middle. Missy got to stand in the shallow end and therefore had some success catching the ball or retrieving it when it landed close. But after Wyatt stole it a few times, she declared herself tired of the game and sat on one of the pool steps to pout. Lucia sat next to her, and Beth could hear them talk.

"I understand how you feel. My brother is aggressive sometimes, too," Lucia said.

"Why isn't your brother at the pool today?" Missy asked. "Did he go somewhere else?"

"No. My brother and I never play with other children, and the only places we ever go are to the market in Brookside sometimes and to this pool. Only with our grandparents...I mean that's how it always was. My brother thinks it should stay that way."

“You mean you never go to the movies or to the playground or church or school, and you never get to play with any kids?” Missy forgot she was sulking and opened her eyes wide.

“Just with each other, until today.”

Missy gave Lucia a long look and cocked her head to the side. “I’m glad you came out to swim with us. Maybe tomorrow your brother will come.”

Lucia smiled and looked at her hands. She might have said more, but Wyatt hauled himself up onto the edge of the pool. He sat close to where the girls were talking. Lucia looked uncomfortable, and Beth didn’t want her to bolt.

“Why don’t you kids take a break and try some of these snacks?” she said. “We have lemonade, fruit, and cheese.” She held up a bag. “And homemade cookies. We can scoot these chairs around so everyone can fit under the umbrella.”

“These are your Grandma’s homemade chocolate cookies,” Arnie said. “I highly recommend eating at least one.”

Beth poured the lemonade while Arnie and the children arranged the chairs. Lucia at first hung back but was not hard to convince to stay for treats. They sat with their towels around their shoulders or laps while diving into the snack tray. Arnie entertained them with stories of swimming in ponds and falling into the water during canoe trips on the rapid rivers in the Ozark hills of southern Missouri. Beth noticed with disbelief how fast the food disappeared and made a mental note to be sure to prepare enough for these growing pre-teens as the week went on. She smiled when her grandchildren teased their grandpa and remembered past experiences they’d had together.

Lucia ate daintily, her long dripping hair tucked behind her ears, cheeks rosy and large dark eyes sparkling. She smiled at the silliness, alert to each contribution, but she said little. Missy passed the

treats to her and directed comments to her. Wyatt shot glances Lucia's way, clearly a fan.

"Does your grandmother make cookies as good as these?" Wyatt asked their guest.

"My favorite sweet made by Grandmother is *Pionono*," Lucia said.

"What's that?" Missy asked.

"It looks like a small cake, rolled up, with Manjar Blanco inside."

"Maybe it's like a jelly roll," Beth said.

"What's Manjar Blanco?" Missy asked.

"My grandmother heats milk and sugar until it's very thick," Lucia explained. "In Peru, Manjar Blanco is used in many desserts. It's sooooo good."

"I'd like to try one of those Piononos," Wyatt said while picking up another chocolate cookie.

Lucia smiled as if she'd been given a gift. "Maybe she'll make some for us while you are here." Her smile faded as fast as it bloomed. "Maybe."

Missy asked, "Why doesn't your grandmother let you go anywhere except to the store?" She said it in an unembarrassed way as if continuing an uninterrupted conversation.

"It isn't my grandmother, you see. It was my grandfather. He said he made that rule to protect us. We've been following it all our lives. So now...now that my grandfather is...is no longer with us, we are still following his rules. Except for the elevator." Lucia stopped and looked first at Beth, then at Arnie, and then at the table.

Wyatt frowned and leaned in, oblivious to Lucia's restraint. "What was the elevator part?"

Seeing Lucia's body stiffen, Beth said, "You can tell us, Lucia. We already know the elevator started working properly after your grandfather passed away. Was he responsible for the elevator not going to the tenth floor from the garage and lobby levels?"

“The elevator wouldn’t go to the tenth floor?” Wyatt turned his head from Lucia to Beth to Arnie.

“Did you have to walk up ten stories, Grandma and Grandpa?” Missy asked. “I bet you got tired.”

Arnie laughed. “We would’ve gotten tired walking up all those steps, Missy, but the elevator took us up part way, then stopped, then took us the rest of the way up after we pressed the button again.”

“Abuelo, I mean, my grandfather, was a very good technology engineer. Before I was born, he was hired by an engineering company in Kansas City to move here from Peru. He used his skills to make the signal be scrambled when someone pressed the tenth-floor button from the lobby. The elevator would be sent to a random floor where the person would have to press 10 again. A beeper in our condo warned us when someone was coming and gave us time to get away from the front room. Lucas and I were never allowed to answer the door, even when a delivery was made.” She ventured a small grin. “We had fun guessing which floor the elevator would go to each time we rode up.”

Lucia sounded matter-of-fact, not sad, not proud, and not apologetic. Beth thought it must have become such an ordinary part of her life to hide from people that she had no idea being forced into that lifestyle was abusive. Except, maybe she did. Surely she watched television and read books. Wyatt, Missy, and Arnie were sitting with their mouths open and nothing to say. Not even Missy made another comment.

Beth said, “Well, that solves the mystery of the elevator glitch. We wondered why it happened only to us. Except for the delivery people and your family, we were the only ones coming to the tenth floor all the time.”

Lucia nodded.

Wyatt said, “So your grandmother doesn’t make you control the elevator anymore?”

“No. We didn’t do it while the police guards were here, of course, and since Abuela met Mrs. Stockwell, she feels safe to let people come up as long as Lucas and I don’t answer the door. Lucas disconnected the wires.”

Wyatt looked at Arnie and mouthed, “Police guards?”

Arnie whispered back, “Later.”

Beth sat in the chair beside Lucia’s, and she watched the girl’s face turn pink. Lucia clenched and unclenched her hands. Was she embarrassed, scared, or just unsure how Beth’s family would react to her revelations?

Wyatt turned toward the uncomfortable girl. “Your grandma let you come to the pool with us today. I guess you don’t have to hide from people anymore, huh?”

Lucia looked at him and nodded. Then she shook her head. Her eyes grew moist as she stood and began to collect her towel and slip on her shirt and flip-flops. She swallowed to control her voice and turned to Beth. “Thank you for inviting me. It’s time for me to go in now.”

Beth rushed to smooth over their blundering inquisition. “We didn’t mean to be nosy. Please forgive us if we’ve asked questions that are too personal. I hope you and your brother, too, if he’d like, will join us again tomorrow afternoon.” She looked at Wyatt and Missy who both nodded with energy.

“Please come again,” Missy blurted.

“My other granddaughter, who is your age, will be here tomorrow, too. We’ll all come down to the pool at around three-thirty again.”

Lucia’s eyes brightened, as if she was surprised they’d want her back. “Okay,” she whispered before she took off at a rapid walk toward the door.

Missy took a bite of cheese and stuck a grape in her mouth. “She’s nice,” she said with her mouth full.

Wyatt glared at her with big brother disapproval. “What?” Missy turned the corners of her mouth down.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Missy’s right,” Arnie said. “Lucia is nice, and saying so with your mouth full might be okay at a picnic by the pool.” He smiled, and Missy perked up again.

“Will you tell us about the police guards now?” Wyatt asked.

“Well,” Arnie began, “we should have explained this all before you met Lucia. You know how we told you that Lucia and her brother lost their grandfather recently...

Arnie and Beth explained that Mr. Ramos fell from his balcony and the police had to examine the condo to determine what made him fall. Both children popped to alert attention at that, and Wyatt looked up the side of the building toward the tenth floor. Beth didn’t want to upset the kids, so she tried to make the investigation sound routine and bland. She told them the police guarded the doors to make sure no one went in and moved anything until they figured out how Lucia’s grandfather fell.

“That would be destroying the evidence,” Wyatt said.

“What evidence?” Missy asked.

“Like fingerprints and overturned furniture and (he looked at his grandparents) murder weapons.”

“Was Lucia’s grandfather *murdered*?” Missy asked Arnie and Beth.

“Um,” Beth said.

“We’re not sure. The investigation is ongoing,” Arnie said.

How were they going to explain to their daughter and son-in-law if their kids came home freaked out by a murder happening across the hall?



## CHAPTER 13

### COUSINS

**B**eth's son and daughter-in-law, Clay and Janae, brought their daughter, Alana, to her grandparents' new condo and stayed for Sunday lunch. Carrying a pink duffle bag, Alana had brought clothes to stay two nights. The cousins didn't see each other often, and Beth thought this would be a good way for them to become better acquainted. Her son's family hadn't visited the new digs since they had helped Beth and Arnie move in, and they all wanted to take a tour and exclaim over how it had come together.

Alana, although a year and a half older, had a tiny build and stood only half an inch or so taller than Missy, who was lanky like her brother. Missy, a tall talkative blond, and Alana, an itchy, quiet girl with auburn hair who liked sitting with a book or writing in her journal, seemed as different as a golden retriever pup and a mature cocker spaniel. Beth wanted them to know each other so they'd stay in contact as they became adults and retain those family ties that would give them a source of memories and keep them grounded.

After lunch, Missy grabbed Alana to show her the guest room they would share. She closed the door behind them. Wyatt lounged on the couch with his

Tablet to play games. Psycho Cat curled up next to Wyatt. The adults took their iced teas to the balcony. Beth enjoyed catching up with her kids. Her adult children were so busy with their careers that she didn't see Clay and his family much more than she did her daughter's family who lived so far away. The day proved too hot for a prolonged stay on the balcony, however, and it wasn't long before Janae listed all the chores she had yet to get done before the weekend came to an end. Clay and Janae hugged Alana good-bye and left.

Since they'd spent the morning preparing for the family luncheon, Beth suggested they walk Psycho Cat in Brookside before time to meet Lucia at the pool.

"And her brother, Lucas, too, I hope," Wyatt said. "Grandpa and I don't want to be surrounded by girls and their girl talk."

"We'll find out when we get there. In a few years, you'll think four females to two guys are good odds," Arnie said. "Meanwhile, you can help me put the harness and leash on this wild cat."

Maybe Sylvester didn't like being called wild, or maybe he wanted to be the one to choose when to take a walk. The cat streaked behind the sofa when he saw Arnie coming with the small harness. When Wyatt pulled the furniture out to reach behind, Psycho Cat jumped past him onto the back and across the sofa and pelted toward the bedroom hallway. By the time Arnie, Wyatt, and Alana and Missy, too, who had joined the posse, got to the hallway, the cat had disappeared.

"Split up and conquer," Arnie said and pointed each of them to a different bedroom and the office. They all reappeared in the hall without the feline. Arnie posted himself as a lookout, and the kids searched the two bathrooms. No cat. They searched the bedrooms again. No luck. "I don't think he could have gotten past us, but I guess we'll have to take our walk without him."

“He’s got to be here somewhere,” Missy said. “I’ve never walked a cat. We can keep looking, can’t we, Grandpa?”

Beth stuck her head around the corner. “Trouble?” she asked.

“The cat’s in hiding,” Wyatt said.

“This has happened before, but I have an idea where he might be.” Beth went into her bedroom and pulled back the decorative pillows. A lump under the bedspread didn’t move. Beth pulled the spread away and gave the cat a little rub. She rearranged the pillows around him and turned to the family. “You know the old saying, ‘Let sleeping dogs lie’? It might apply to cats, too. We can walk him tomorrow morning at the time I usually take him out. Okay?”

There wasn’t much choice. When Psycho Cat wasn’t up for a walk, they’d have to carry him out kicking and meowing to take him with them. The five of them left for their walk without the cat.

At the elevator, Missy pointed to the penthouse door. “That’s where Lucia lives. She’s the one who’s going to meet us at the pool later. Her grandfather was murdered.”

“Missy!” Beth said. “We didn’t say he was murdered. We said he fell from the balcony.”

“Well, you said the police were there to find stuff.”

“Evidence,” Wyatt said, “And, actually, they didn’t say he wasn’t murdered.” He glared at his sister.

Alana looked at each of them with a serious look on her face. “Is Lucia sad?” she asked.

“Yes, I think she’s sad. Maybe a little confused, too.” Beth said. “Let’s get on this elevator, and we’ll fill you in with as much as we know.”

Arnie told Alana about Mr. Ramos’s untimely end. Wyatt added that the police guarded the door to protect the evidence. Missy gazed at her granddad with worried eyes and asked if Lucia’s grandfather was really murdered.

“We don’t know for sure, honey. That’s what ‘ongoing investigation’ means. They’re still trying to find out.”

“Did the police *find* any evidence? Do they have suspects?” Alana asked. Beth did a double take, and Arnie peered sideways at his granddaughter with surprise. Alana shrugged. “I read lots of mysteries. There are always suspects, and the idea is to figure out which one did it.”

Beth admitted someone they knew had been arrested for pushing Mr. Ramos. She stressed that his guilt wasn’t proven and said she didn’t think the man they knew would have done it. Arnie gave Beth a look that said he didn’t think she needed to tell everything they knew. “Who wants a soda pop to drink while we walk?” he asked as they crossed the park toward the Brookside business district.

They circled four blocks of shops and spent time eyeing kid stuff in the New Dime Store and the Learning Store. They all finished their sodas, pitched the cups into a bin, and spent some time inside the air conditioned New Dime Store cooling off and looking for pool toys or games. By the time they bought a floating ring toss game and got back to the condo, they were again hot and perspiring. A dip in the pool would be welcome.



## CHAPTER 14 **AT THE POOL**

The kids eyed the penthouse door as they waited for the elevator. All their preparations had made them a few minutes late, but there was no noise, no indication whether anyone from inside that door would be waiting for them at the pool. They whispered guesses as to whether one or both of the twins would be there to play with them. Alana's eyes were big. Beth put her arm around her.

"I know we've made this into a big issue," she told Alana, "but it isn't part of one of your scary whodunits. Lucia is a nice girl, just your age, and we had fun with her yesterday. Wyatt wants her brother, Lucas, to be there so he'll have a boy to hang out with. The only mystery is whether one or both or neither will be there."

As soon as they opened the door to the pool area, Missy whooped, "Hi, Lucia!" She ran to an open table to drop off her towel and cover-up but then slowed as she neared the pool and realized there was a second dark head bobbing across the water near the far end. Wyatt followed on his sister's heels at a more dignified pace, threw his towel and shirt onto a chair and turned toward the pool carrying the ring-toss game.

Alana lagged behind with Beth and Arnie, but she had a smile on her face and tip-toed across the hot cement in her bare feet to the pool's steps as soon as she had helped Beth stash the snack basket and towels at the table.

Lucia introduced her brother, Lucas, who swam toward the children looking wary. Beth introduced Alana. Lucas was a bit taller than his sister but otherwise had similar rosy coloring, black hair, and long-lashed brown eyes. He wore navy blue swim trunks of the same conservative mold as his sister's navy tank suit.

"We're glad you could join us today," Beth said.

"We bought a new pool game this morning," Wyatt said. "Guys against girls. Okay, Lucas? We'll crush them."

Lucas hadn't smiled yet or said a word. He only nodded his head to acknowledge the introductions and the invitation to be on the male team. Alana surprised them all when she responded to Wyatt's boast. "In your dreams you'll crush us, Wyatt Earp. Girls rule!"

Wyatt placed the floating stakes in place, Arnie read off the game instructions, and it took only a few minutes for all of them to be cheering each other on and high-fiving teammates who threw rings onto the floating posts. Lucia and Lucas both were star players on their teams.

"You've got the knack, Lucas," Arnie said.

"Yeah, where'd you learn to throw a ring like that, Luke?" Wyatt asked. "I bet you shoot baskets like a pro."

"We have a room full of exercise equipment and skill games," Lucas said. "Lucia and I train for an hour every day. I stay longer whenever I can." His accent was purely American, as was his sister's.

"Grandfather thinks...thought...boys should be strong and skillful," Lucia said. "He put up with my

training just so Lucas would have someone to compete with.” Lucia’s smile belied the sarcasm of her words.

“But Lucia became so good that she beats me.”

“Only sometimes,” the girl said, giving her twin a fond look.

Like the day before, Beth left the pool first followed by Arnie after a short while. The five children played the game for a short time longer but were soon organized into racing matches by Wyatt. He gave Missy a head start each time her turn came, but she lost interest after everyone beat her, and she retreated to the steps. Lucia and then Alana joined her, and soon all three girls were chatting and giggling.

Beth observed that although Wyatt was the leader, Alana had a way about her that made people feel good. She wondered what the girls were discussing when they became more serious—school, clothes, or favorite TV shows, maybe? She couldn’t hear them above the noise made by the boys, especially Wyatt who suggested one competition after another. She was proud to see that he accepted defeat each time with a shout out to Lucas and a lifting of his chin that suggested he was determined to find a contest he could win. Wyatt had grown up learning various swim strokes and finally found one that Lucas couldn’t do as well.

The kids acted like old friends when Beth called them to the table after almost an hour in the sun. Alana made sure the girls sat together, and with her brother along, Lucia seemed much more at ease than she had the day before. Missy asked no questions about the twins’ grandfather. Instead, she sought to be a part of the older girls’ banter.

Beth’s cell phone rang. It was H el ene. The girls seemed to be involved in a giggle fest, and Arnie was deep into a discussion about the Kansas City Royals with Wyatt and Lucas. So Beth took the phone to a quiet spot on the other side of the pool to talk.

“Pardon me for asking for your help again,” H el ene said, “I need someone to look after Fabienne while I go to a meeting with Viktor’s lawyer, Mr. Montorlee. He wants to talk to Viktor and me in a conference room at the jail. He says it’s important.”

“And you want to be able to concentrate on what is being said without worrying about Fabienne. I understand.”

“I know your grandchildren are visiting, but do you know of a babysitter from this building I could get right away? The teenager I’ve asked before isn’t home today.”

“I’m sorry, I haven’t needed a babysitter for so long I don’t keep track. But, why don’t you bring Fabienne down to the pool? The kids are eating a snack right now and are about ready to go back in for another half hour or so. I’ll take Fabienne into the shallow end if you dress her in her bathing suit, and then she can go upstairs with us until you return and help entertain my grandchildren. Will that work for you?”

H el ene’s voice broke as if her emotional state was already so fragile that the bit of kindness drove her to tears. “I hope someday I’ll be able to repay your kindness,” she said.

Beth clicked off her phone, feeling anxious for H el ene but pleased she could help in a small way, and turned to walk back to the table to inform the group that the toddler would be joining them. Her mind elsewhere, she smacked into her metal chair, bruised her thighs, and broke a fingernail as she reached out to steady herself.

“Ow,” she said. No one at the table across the pool paid any attention, and she stepped around the chair. Then, she stopped. Wait! She had volunteered to watch the daughter of the suspected killer of Mr. Ramos. How would Lucas and Lucia react? She sat down in the offending chair, ready to call H el ene back with

some excuse. No. She dropped the hand with the phone into her lap.

She couldn't do it. She'd just have to play it by ear. There was a good chance H el ene and the twins had never met since Lucas and Lucia had been hidden away from people. If they had seen each other in the lobby or at the pool, they might not have known who they were seeing.

"Alana," Beth said as she approached the table, "would you come with me for a minute? I'm going to watch a little toddler named Fabienne for an hour or so while her mother goes on an important errand, and I need your help to carry her things out here when I pick her up."

Beth watched Lucia and Lucas when she said the name, Fabienne, but they had no reaction that she could tell. She mentally exhaled with relief. She and Alana went inside the building to meet H el ene and collect Fabienne.

"Where Vesther?" Fabienne asked when she saw Beth.

"The kitty's upstairs. I brought Alana instead. Do you want to go swimming with us?"

Fabienne smiled at Alana and lifted her arms to show off her water wings. "Come with me, Fabienne. It'll be fun." Alana said and took the little girl by the hand while Beth took a well-stocked diaper bag from H el ene and followed.

After an initial shyness about getting in the water with all the older children splashing around her, Fabienne warmed up to the kids who talked baby talk to her and induced her to bat back the ball they tossed gently to her. She laughed and splashed back at them causing Beth's grandchildren to hoot and show off with backspins and ball tosses.

Lucia and Lucas approached the baby with gentle words and tentative, outstretched fingers for her to grab. Lucia asked Beth if she could hold the child and

help her float across the pool. Beth agreed but walked close behind the two. Fabienne loved it, and after that, every one of the children had to have a turn helping Fabienne float. Lucas took his turn last and gave the toddler tips about moving her arms and legs. For a moment or two he loosened up and smiled at everyone when she propelled herself through the water for a short time.

“Isn’t it amazing,” Beth said to Arnie who had come to stand beside her in the pool as they watched the kids, “how kids take to babies and toddlers?”

“Those twins look awestruck—like they’ve never been around a tiny person before.”

“I don’t think they have. Remember Lucia said they’ve been following her grandfather’s rules all their lives. I want to ask what happened to their parents, but I don’t want them to clam up.”

It was almost five-thirty when Arnie announced it was time they all went in to get ready for dinner. Groans erupted from Wyatt and Alana, and Missy complained she hadn’t had as many times as the other kids to help Fabienne float.

“Fabienne’s mother will be here soon, and we need to take her upstairs to get into dry clothes. You can help me dress her, Missy.”

Alana, Lucia, and Missy helped Fabienne drape her pink *Miss Kitty* towel around her shoulders, and the three of them took turns holding the little girl’s hands as they all walked into the building. Beth carried Fabienne in the elevator while Missy toted the diaper bag and Arnie brought the snack basket and extra towels.

At the penthouse door across from the elevator, Lucas pointed his remote toward the security lock. Missy made a disappointed squawk when Lucia headed to the door. “Grandma and Grandpa, can

Lucia and Lucas eat dinner with us after they change clothes?”

“We have a video of *Captain America: The Avengers* to watch after dinner. They could stay and watch it with us,” Wyatt said. “I mean, if it’s okay with you.”

Arnie nodded. “It’s up to Grandma. She’s the dinner maker.”

Beth took Fabienne off her shoulder and balanced her on her own two feet. Fabienne, who had ridden up the elevator with her thumb in her mouth, let out a howl and stretched her arms to be picked up until Alana took one of her small hands and coaxed her away. Missy rushed over to take the toddler’s other hand while looking up at her grandmother for an answer to the dinner question, and Lucia looked as if she’d like to help, too, although she stayed by her door.

“Thanks, girls,” Beth said, “I’m not used to carrying such a chunky little package in my arms for very long. As for dinner—sure, we have plenty of the spaghetti sauce I made for this week. We’d love to have you join us.”

Lucia and Lucas looked at each other. Lucia’s eyes appeared to Beth to radiate hope, but Lucas looked stern. “We need to help our abuela make dinner, and she wouldn’t want us to...to be gone for so long,” Lucas said. Lucia looked at the floor with a weak nod.

Alana piped up from where she was eliciting giggles from Fabienne with a spur of the moment game of toddler tag around the legs of Arnie and Beth. “Your abuela can come to dinner with you. Grandma and Grandpa have plenty, right, Grandma?”

Seeing a worried scowl form on Lucas’s face and something like panic descend on Lucia, Beth spoke before they had to formulate another excuse. “We’ll invite them another evening after Lucas and Lucia have time to talk to their grandmother about it. She

might have food laid out and ready to prepare for this evening.”

“Tomorrow,” Missy said. “You said we won’t be going to the pool tomorrow because we’ll be busy all day. Can we ask them over for tomorrow dinner? That’ll give them time to ask their grandma.”

“I don’t think...,” Lucas began.

“What time?” Lucia asked, receiving a look that could kill from her brother.

“Six-thirty,” Arnie said when Beth couldn’t get anything to come out of her mouth after watching the drama unfold on the children’s faces. Arnie glanced at her and continued, “I’ll get a bucket of fried chicken and all the trimmings. You need to come so we don’t all gain weight from eating three extra helpings.” He grinned and winked.

Lucas looked surprised, whispered “thank you,” hurried a smiling Lucia through the door, and closed it. Beth could hear the locks click into place just as she had on previous visits to the penthouse. What would now take place on the inside of that door, she wondered. She pulled on Arnie’s arm while their grandchildren surged toward their condo door with Fabienne pattering happily along with them.

“What made you be so insistent?” Beth hissed. “You know Mrs. Ramos is still reluctant to let go of her husband’s rules, and the twins are...I don’t know...scared or maybe don’t want to push too hard. She’s in a wheelchair, after all. I mean...not that kind of push. You know what I’m trying to say.”

Arnie grinned. “Those two kids are bright and athletic. Lots of potential. Time they come out of hiding and learn how to deal with the world.”

“It’s odd,” Beth said. “I’ve never been asked inside when I’ve taken food to the penthouse, and the twins meet us at the pool rather than up here. Surely they aren’t afraid of their grandmother. So are they

protecting her from us? What do they think we might do? I hope we're gaining their trust."



## CHAPTER 15 **MORE SUSPICIONS**

A short time after the family all helped diaper and dress Fabienne, showered and changed into dry clothes, and put some toys from the diaper bag out on the floor, H el ene came to collect her daughter. Beth invited her in, introduced Wyatt and Missy, and reintroduced Alana. Fabienne pattered over to her Mama to show her a toy and went back to play with the kids on the floor.

H el ene sighed. "It's good to see my little one engrossed and not clinging to me, but it's hard to see my baby turn into a person who doesn't need me all the time."

Beth smiled. "I remember how that feels. Enjoy the moment. It's the first of many. Why don't you sit and relax for a few minutes. May I get you a cup of tea or a glass of wine?"

H el ene dropped into the easy chair closest to the kitchen. "I don't want to disturb you at dinner time, but a sip of wine sounds fantastic."

"It's okay," Arnie said. "I think we can all put off dinner for a while after the huge amount we ate at the pool late this afternoon."

"He's right," Beth said as she went to the kitchen to put her sauce on to simmer. "I overdid the snacks."

Besides, it'll take the sauce half an hour, at least, to reheat. I'll put it on low and forget it while we chat."

The three adults settled in, each with a stem of cold Riesling. Beth and Arnie brought smiles to H el ene's worried-looking face by describing how much fun Fabienne had in the pool with all the children. When Beth told her that a set of twins named Lucas and Lucia played with them, too, and that Lucas gave Fabienne a brief swimming lesson, H el ene smiled but didn't react to the names.

"Did Mr. Montorlee say anything encouraging at your meeting with him?" Beth asked and then saw H el ene's distressed expression.

"The news he gave us is not good," she said. "Detectives found Alexei and questioned him after they looked into his background records. He's a member of the separatist group that wants the part of the Ukraine where Viktor's family lives to break away and become part of Russia."

"Viktor's brother is a separatist? Did Viktor know?" Arnie asked.

H el ene looked at him with surprise. "Viktor and Alexei are countrymen and companions, not brothers."

"Ah, thus Ukrainian brothers, as in comrades."

"Yes. And Mr. Montorlee told us Alexei is believed to have come to the United States to raise money for his cause. He's in contact with Russian nationals who live or work here, and is sending money to the rebel fighters in the Ukraine."

"And the money Viktor gave him went there rather than to his family?" Beth said.

"Viktor says he didn't know how Alexei was using the money and neither did Mr. Ramos. He told Mr. Montorlee the same thing he told me, that Mr. Ramos wanted to help Viktor's family because they are living where there is fighting and disruption to their lives. Mr. Ramos lived through that kind of unrest in Peru

during the years of the clash between the military and the Shining Path insurgency.”

“Why did Viktor rely on Alexei to send the money to his family rather than sending it himself?” Arnie asked.

“Viktor’s parents live in a small village where Russian is spoken. Two of his siblings have left, like Viktor, but two sisters and their families live in the village as well as aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. As far as Viktor knew, Alexei was raising money for an organization that helps all of them, plus others in the town. Viktor is a generous man. He’d have wanted to help everyone.”

“So Viktor didn’t know Alexei was sending money to the separatist rebels?”

“He says he didn’t know. I believe him, but I don’t think the police do. Maybe his lawyer doesn’t believe him. Mr. Montorlee doesn’t display his thoughts on his face, but he didn’t say he believed Viktor.”

“Mr. Montorlee will still work to obtain evidence that Viktor didn’t kill Mr. Ramos, won’t he?” Beth asked with alarm in her voice and glanced at the children to make sure no one was looking at her. At the same time, it hit her—how did Viktor not know the money wasn’t going to his family? Wouldn’t he have heard from them? Surely there were phone calls made in the Ukraine, even in small villages, or letters going back and forth. Could Viktor be lying to his wife? Was he part of the separatist money-making scheme? Did he kill Mr. Ramos?

Hélène dropped her chin and closed her eyes for several seconds before she answered. Her body seemed to grow limp inside her royal blue and white striped summer dress. “Mr. Montorlee believes Viktor’s position is worse now. He says the fact the money went to a political group gave Viktor motive to write the threatening letter when Mr. Ramos quit donating. They have the fingerprints on the paper as physical

evidence. But..." H el ene looked first Beth, and then Arnie, in the eyes. "But Viktor didn't know where the money was going, and he didn't threaten or kill Mr. Ramos. I know it."

Beth looked at Arnie and then back at H el ene. "Alexei had the same motive as Viktor—even more so. Could he have framed Viktor?" The silence that followed attracted Fabienne's attention. She crept over and laid her head in her mother's lap. H el ene swiped at a tear that escaped from a mutinous eye. "There's something else," she said while she smoothed her daughter's springy red-gold curls, "We have very little savings and no money coming in. I paid Mr. Montorlee a small retainer, and now I can't pay the rent this month. Finding a job and a babysitter may take some time."

Beth's face brightened. "My sister, Meg, learned about a possible opening from her teacher friend whose husband is a chef. I meant to tell you this weekend, but we've been so busy."

H el ene sniffed and watched Arnie walk into the kitchen to stir the simmering marinara sauce that released a hopeful, spicy aroma into the atmosphere when he lifted the pan lid.

"I have an idea," Beth said. "We have time tomorrow morning before we go to a play at the Theatre for Young America in the afternoon. I planned to take the girls shopping on the Country Club Plaza while Arnie and Wyatt practice golf. But—Sylvester could use a walk..."

Fabienne looked up from her mother's lap. "Vesther?"

On cue, the big cat appeared through the bedroom hallway door and pranced with a purposeful gait straight toward Fabienne and H el ene. At Fabienne's squeal of delight, Alana and Missy quit working on the colorful Lego castles they'd been building, ostensibly for the little girl, and Wyatt, propped on pillows on the

sofa, looked up from the electronic game he'd been playing since the girls took over the baby toys.

Psycho Cat pawed at Fabienne's shoulder. When she petted his head the way her mother showed her, the cat produced such a loud purr that the whole group giggled. Even H el ene smiled a little. Psycho Cat, it seemed to Beth, always knew when he was needed and appeared like magic. Or was that a figment of her imagination? She looked Psycho Cat in the eye and thought she saw him wink. Or, was it a blink?

Beth smiled. "Anyway—we could all walk to the Prairie Village Shopping Center, instead. It's only a couple of miles from here. There's a French restaurant called Caf e Provence, a French bakery, and a French Market there. I think they're all connected in some way. Meg mentioned openings. We can take Fabienne shopping with us while you talk to the managers and tell them about your experience. Is that okay with you girls? Our shopping may be cut down a little since ol' Sylvester won't be welcome in most stores, but you'll each have a stroller to push, and maybe I can give H el ene money to get us each a French pastry while she's in the bakery."

"Yes!" Alana and Missy said together.

"Es," Fabienne said, parroting the girls. She looked up at her mother with a big baby-toothed grin.

H el ene kissed the top of her daughter's head. "I guess the right answer must be yes."

"Arnie, will you bring the laptop to look up the hours? I bet at least the bakery is open early," Beth said.

After they'd made their plans, packed up the toys, and planned to meet at H el ene's condo at eight-thirty the next morning, Beth joined Arnie in the kitchen to make the spaghetti and a salad while the kids argued over which video they'd watch after dinner. Beth's mind was on the revelation about Alexei's Russian separatist alignment.

“Don’t you think Alexei has more reason than Viktor to need for money to keep coming?” she asked. But she didn’t wait for an answer. To Beth’s way of thinking, H el ene’s and Viktor’s story must be true because she was so fond of the family. “Alexei could easily have gotten paper with Viktor’s fingerprints and forged his signature. And Alexei has a Russian accent.”

“Not so fast, Beth,” Arnie said. “The police found Alexei and looked into his background. They would have come to the same conclusion you did. Maybe he has the alibi that Viktor doesn’t. Maybe there’s more information that we don’t have. Law enforcement has such sophisticated crime investigation techniques these days. They’ll find out the truth.”

Beth opened her mouth, ready to object to Viktor being kept in jail if he was no longer the only suspect when Alana wandered into the kitchen in her quiet way with her hands folded behind her back. “Just the girl I wanted to see,” Beth said. “Would you like to help set the table while we finish up in here?”

Alana frowned. Not the reaction Beth expected. “Grandma and Grandpa, I sort of overheard Fabienne’s mother talking to you. Is Fabienne’s father the one suspected of killing Lucia and Lucas’s grandfather?”

Beth drew a sharp breath, and Arnie turned around from the stove where he had been stirring the marinara sauce with a concerned look on his face. He dropped the stirring spoon on the counter and put a hand on Alana’s shoulder. “This isn’t something you should worry about,” he said.

“But you don’t think he did it, do you?” Alana asked both of them.

“Oh, Sweetie,” Beth said grabbing Alana against her, “I didn’t want you kids to learn about these problems. We don’t know yet who is guilty, but we want to help both families while the police discover the truth. Don’t you think that’s the thing to do?”

Alana nodded solemnly. "You should always help your friends."

"Please don't mention this in front of Fabienne's mother, Mrs. Lutsenko, tomorrow during our walk," Beth said.

"I won't," Alana promised.



## CHAPTER 16

### **DETAILS**

The kids were up the next morning before Beth and Arnie, excited to begin the day's adventures. Wyatt dressed and placed cereal and bowls on the table for himself and Arnie while the girls pattered in their shared bedroom deciding on just the right clothes for Missy to wear on their cat-walking hike. Alana had prepared for a two-night visit and didn't have a choice. She donned her red and white shorts, a ruffled navy spaghetti-strap top, and a pair of red, white, and blue sneakers while Missy held up one outfit after another for scrutiny. Alana talked Missy out of wearing a frilly sundress and into a pair of orange shorts and a white T shirt with an orange cat on the front.

"You'll be sorry if you wear flip-flops to walk four miles," Alana said. Missy screwed up her face and put on socks and sneakers. Alana, her hands on her hips, surveyed her cousin. "Now you look 'brilliant.'"

"Smart?" Missy asked.

"Brilliant means smart or great or cool, I think. They use that word a lot in British mysteries."

After Arnie and Wyatt left for their golf outing, Beth strapped the small stroller onto her back, feeling like a mama turtle with her babies milling about. Missy, holding Psycho Cat by his leash with a big smile on

her face, led the way to the elevator. Alana hadn't argued when Missy, jumping up and down, pleaded to be the first to walk the cat. Beth laughed and rushed to catch up when the cat pulled Missy down the hall at a fast clip and then stopped suddenly at the penthouse door rather than at the elevator.

"Come on, Sylvester, that's not the right door," Missy said. The cat reared up, pawing at the handle. Missy looked at Beth as she tugged on the leash to no avail. "Does he want Lucia and Lucas to come with us, Grandma?"

"I don't think so, Missy. Sylvester has never met the twins or their grandmother. He must sense something about that condo door, though. He does that at other doors in the building but only those that have been burglarized." She hefted the cat and set him by the elevator door. Psycho Cat meowed in protest but stayed put.

"You mean a burglar broke into some condos in this building?" Alana said. She scrutinized the penthouse door. "How do you know the crook didn't break into Lucia and Lucas's condo?"

"Oh, here I go, scaring you with another mystery," Beth said, gritting her teeth. "The break-ins weren't very serious. Only little things like coasters and pens were taken. The doors where the burglar picked the locks have dents and scratches and are easy to spot. That's why I don't think the penthouse was hit. I'll show you one of the damaged doors on the sixth floor."

Alana gazed at the penthouse door until the elevator doors snapped shut. "I wonder if Sylvester senses a clue inside that door about Lucia's grandfather's murder that the police don't know."

Beth shrugged but didn't comment.

"Lucia told me about her parents when we were in the pool," Alana said.

"She did? What did she say?" Beth asked.

“Her father left to earn money for his family. Lucia and Lucas were only a few months old, and their mother got sick and brought them to Kansas City to be with her parents. While they were here, their mother died. They’ve lived with their grandparents ever since.”

“Did Lucia say why she and her brother didn’t go back to their father?”

“I asked her that, Grandma. She said she doesn’t know. She always thought her father didn’t want them. But she said her grandmother told her not long ago that her grandfather doesn’t like people from Chile because of some war between Peru and Chile a long time ago. Their father was from Chile.”

“Well, that explains why their grandfather wanted to hide Lucia and Lucas.”

“Why?” Missy asked while keeping a tight rein on Psycho Cat.

“He didn’t want their father to take them back to Chile,” Alana said.

Maybe he hid the twins not only from their father but also from immigration authorities, Beth thought as the elevator door opened on the sixth floor. That left a lot of questions concerning Lucia and Lucas’s futures.

Beth and the girls didn’t have to search to find a dented door after they left the elevator. Psycho Cat stopped at the closest one. He pawed at it without much enthusiasm, but the girls bent to touch and examine the marks still visible on the door as if scrutinizing petroglyphs on a rock wall.

Missy looked up at the contraption Beth wore on her back and stood up. “I think the bad guy had a cart—one to carry groceries home—like the ones those ladies in the lobby had. He could have put a bag in it to carry home the stuff he stole. He banged it against the doors whenever he opened one, and it made these dents and scratches.”

Alana looked from the door to the stroller and back again. Beth reached back to feel the stroller as she

considered the idea. Missy's brainstorm made sense. No one would look twice at a person in the building pushing a shopping cart. Residents often made their trips to the store together, and someone on a wrong floor could be picking up a friend. Beth didn't own one of those carts and didn't know if they had an edge near the bottom that could make those dents. Maybe they'd see one on their way out so she could study it.

Not one shopping cart showed up in the lobby, but there wouldn't have been much time to check it out with the commotion the motley crew created as they left the condo building. A couple of ladies gave advice to Missy while she struggled to keep Psycho Cat headed in a straight line. Then, they both spoke baby talk to Fabienne in her stroller, ignoring her mother who stopped to let them get their baby fixes.

Al was on duty, a big smile on his face, as usual, and rushed to the door to hold it open for Beth's large group. "How's it going young lady?" he asked Missy. "Has Mrs. Stockwell talked you into herding her mega cat?"

Missy turned to answer but was pulled through the door by Psycho Cat and had to give the feline all her attention. Beth introduced her granddaughters and told Al they were all planning to walk to the Prairie Village Shopping Center.

"Whoa. That's a long walk for the young ones. Is Mr. Stockwell home in case you need a ride back?"

"No. We'll be fine."

"Well. If you find out you can't make it all the way, give me a call and I'll send a taxi to pick you up."

Beth noticed him eye H el ene for a moment with a slight squint but make no comment. For her part, H el ene pushed Fabienne's stroller through the door with a quiet thank you to Al, her eyes averted. Beth's heart ached for her.

Missy enjoyed walking Psycho Cat for several blocks on the Trolley Track Trail with Beth carrying him across two busy streets. After that, the cat decided to poke around in the grass and make beelines up the driveways of early twentieth-century Tudors along Gregory Boulevard. When he found a bird-filled tree to scratch, causing everyone to stop and wait, Missy declared her time was up. Beth grasped Psycho Cat's leash. He behaved by walking beside her for a block but then jumped into Fabienne's stroller. Fabienne let out a squeal of delight and hugged the cat tight, but her mother pulled him away. Beth took the jogging stroller off her back and secured Psycho Cat into it.

"Missy, you managed to walk Sylvester farther than I did," Beth said. "Sometimes he's not in the mood for a hike. He should be okay in his stro... Ouch!" Looking at Missy rather than paying attention, she'd bent to reach for her purse on the ground beside the stroller and hit her eyebrow on a handle. She stood up with a hand over her eye.

"I'll push Sylvester's stroller," Alana said.

Not long after, H el ene asked Missy if she'd like to push Fabienne. After that, the walk proceeded at a good clip. At first, the chatter was light—how nice the weather turned out that morning, whether Alana was excited about her middle school orientation the next day, and Fabienne directing a steady stream of patter toward the cat. Missy and Alana traded strollers off and on, Psycho Cat curled in for a nap, and Beth walked with H el ene behind them.

"Did you have a chance to check out Caf e Provence, the French Market, and Dolce Bakery on the Internet?" Beth asked

"I read everything I could find about them," H el ene said. "Viktor and I have been to the French Market once and liked it. But I read all the reviews and the menus. There was an online application form for the

bakery, and I printed it. I'd prefer working at the Café. Pastries were never my main area of expertise. Of course, I'll apply there if there are no other positions available."

"Is the application what you have in the folder you stuck in the stroller pocket?"

"Yes. I also included my résumé and a letter of recommendation given to me by the manager of the restaurant where I worked in Denver."

"Good for you, being so prepared. I hope this works out for you."

While the rest of them were dressed in shorts and tennis shoes, Hélène wore an A-line navy skirt and a cream-colored shell with her walking shoes. She'd stuck a matching summer jacket and some dress sandals in the bottom of the stroller. Beth hoped Hélène would still be as fresh-looking after a two-mile walk.

It was her promise to the girls she'd take them shopping this morning that prompted this journey, but maybe she should have offered to babysit Fabienne rather than accompanying Hélène on this job prospecting. Oh, well, this was meant for Hélène to check out the French establishments. It wasn't to go for actual job interviews, although she could understand why Hélène seemed so anxious.

"Do you have anyone in mind as a babysitter in case you find a job? If not, you could probably advertise in the building. I met a grandmotherly type lady named Tinker who seemed like she'd be a good caretaker. Or—there might be a young mother who'd want to make extra money while staying home with her own child."

Hélène smiled at Beth in a way that made Beth think she might want her to volunteer. "I'd look after her myself, but Arnie and I travel frequently and... I could be a backup sometimes."

"Actually, I was thinking of my sister."

“You have a sister in town?”

“No, my younger sister, Anastasia, lives in Paris with our parents. She’s always been scholastically oriented. Much smarter than me. She’d like to attend a university in the United States to work on a political science degree with an emphasis in international relations. The University of Missouri at Kansas City has a good program.”

“That sounds wonderful, but how does that help you with Fabienne?”

“If Anastasia comes over here as an *au pair*, she can get a work visa, or a student visa if she’s accepted for a degree program. The university offers some of the classes partially online, and we could coordinate her required on-campus classes with my schedule. It would be hard to find a local babysitter who would be willing to work on the weekends and holidays.”

“That might take some time.”

Hélène looked thoughtful. “There’s a teenaged girl who lives with her mother in the condo building and babysits for me from time to time. I asked her if she’d be willing to stay with Fabienne until school starts if I find a job. She agreed. I feel safe because her mother would be close by. I hope I can find a job nearby, too, so I can get home fast if...in case I’m needed. Prairie Village would be almost as convenient as Brookside.”

“Wow. You’ve given this a lot of thought. Your plan sounds like it’ll work. Now, to find you a job. Right?”

Hélène furrowed her brow and turned to look at Beth. “It’s very generous of you to be patient about the overdue rent. I won’t be able to pay until after I get my first pay check, whenever that may be. Even then, I won’t catch up for several months.” She lowered her eyes. “Much of the money must go to Mr. Montorlee until Viktor is free.”

“I understand,” Beth said feeling a sudden deflation of her enthusiasm. She hadn’t been thinking about Hélène’s inner turmoil. Of course, Hélène’s first

thoughts must be of her husband. Beth hoped H el ene didn't think she was helping her find a job just so she could pay her rent. Although... Having rent money coming in would be nice for Arnie and her. It was a calculated part of their retirement income. It wasn't selfish—just practical—to think about that.

The group came to Belinder Street, and Beth rushed forward to make sure the street was free of traffic before helping Missy edge the stroller over the curb. The quiet neighborhood had little traffic, and they had no trouble crossing. Beth peered around at the flowers blooming in gardens and alongside the peaceful family homes.

“Do the flower gardens here remind you of Paris?” Beth asked H el ene.

“It has many of the same kinds of flowers, but Paris is farther north than Kansas City and cooler. The flowers there grow lush.”

Beth didn't respond as she gazed at the fire-engine-red begonias edging the bushes in the yard they were passing and at the mounds of pink, peach, and white impatiens in the shade of a great oak next door. How could anything be lush? But, in an attempt to steer away from heavy subjects, she continued to ask about Paris, and soon Alana and Missy were adding their own questions.

Outside of Dolce Bakery, they all stopped with H el ene as she changed shoes and put on her jacket. She kissed Fabienne and told her to be good as she bent to get her folder. Then, she took a deep breath and entered the building.



## CHAPTER 17

### **ABUELA'S "CONDITION"**

"I got to push Fabienne and Psycho Cat in their strollers today," Missy told Wyatt in her nah-nah-nah-nah voice.

"Well, aren't you special," Wyatt said. "I hit one golf ball farther than any of Grandpa's."

"Well, we had French pastries."

"I ate a foot-long chili dog and fries."

Missy turned away with a defeated pout, but Alana, an only child, listened to the sibling rivalry banter with a half-smile on her face. "My mom tells my dad that hotdogs and chili give a person indigestion, and French fries cause high cholesterol," she said. "Come on, Missy, let's go change into our new outfits for the movie."

Wyatt groaned.

"Don't worry, we're not going to shop at Union Station," Arnie said, "and I think you'll like the Robotics show on the 3D Extreme Screen. There's a great model train exhibit, too."

"Can I wear what I have on?"

"Absolutely."

"Did H el ene get the job Meg told you about?" Arnie asked Beth after the girls left and Wyatt disappeared with his tablet in hand.

“She has an interview with the manager of the restaurant tomorrow. The French Market sells foods for takeout that are made in the Café Provence kitchen. The restaurant wasn’t open yet, but someone at the market took her to visit the chefs, and I guess they were impressed with her knowledge and credentials. But the Café Provence folks will have to check her resident worker status, fill out paperwork, and so on. I don’t know much about requirements for immigrant workers.”

“Neither do I, but it sounds as if the process could take a while. Hope they’ll want Hélène enough to sift through the rigmarole.”

“So do I. Oh, I found out more about our penthouse neighbors today, too.” Wyatt came into the room, followed by Alana and Missy. “I’ll tell you later.”

After their outing at Union Station that included a walk to the Crown Center shops over the sky walk and a frozen custard treat, about an hour remained before they all needed to prepare for possible dinner guests. Beth gave in to the kids who clamored for a quick dip in the pool before dinner. Alana called her parents to ask them to let her stay until bedtime.

“We didn’t get to see our new friends from across the hall yet today,” she told her mother, “and they are invited to dinner and a video with us this evening. I promise I’ll get up in time for the school orientation meeting tomorrow morning.” Alana listened and then handed the phone to Beth. “Mom wants to make sure it’s okay for me to stay.”

“Hi Janae,” Beth said to her daughter-in-law. “We’d love for Alana to stay a little longer than planned this evening, if it’s not too much trouble for you to pick her up around nine-thirty. We’re not sure yet whether her new friend will be here, but Wyatt and Missy will enjoy having her here.”

Janae agreed. Beth, in her street clothes, accompanied the kids to the pool in accordance with the condo rules requiring an adult to be present with children under age fourteen. Arnie stayed behind to check his e-mail and to have time to drive to his favorite chicken restaurant. He promised to bring home enough chicken and sides for three extra even though they hadn't seen or heard from Lucia or Lucas all day.

Beth and her grandchildren reached the pool area a little before five o'clock. Missy stepped onto the patio first and let out a shriek. The penthouse twins were toweling themselves off near a table across the pool. Beth, remembering the rule about kids not being allowed in the pool area without an adult, looked around to see if their grandmother was sitting nearby. She wasn't, but there were a couple of other grownups lounging on the patio. Beth wondered if they counted.

"Hi, Lucia," Missy shouted, and she loped toward them. In a quieter voice she said, "Hi, Lucas."

Alana and Wyatt weren't far behind. When Beth reached the group, Missy was regaling the older children with her imitations of the "awesome" robot from the Extreme Screen program. Lucia giggled and nodded at her antics, but Lucas remained serious.

Wyatt interrupted his sister. "You guys want to go back in the pool with us for a little while?"

Lucia deferred to Lucas who was shaking his head. "No," he said, "We've been out here long enough today. It's the rule. Too much sun isn't good." Lucia faced the others with a resigned look.

"Well, then, we'll see you for dinner and video at six-thirty, okay?" Alana said. "My mom and dad are picking me up at nine-thirty tonight, so I can stay until we finish watching the movie."

Beth watched Lucia silently mouth *please, Lucas*. His stern look didn't waver, but he seemed to consider before he responded. "Your invitation is very kind," he

said. “My sister and I will join you this evening, but our grandmother doesn’t feel—comfortable—in social situations. She will have to decline.”

“Tell your grandmother we’d love to have her company, and she might enjoy getting out for the evening with you young people. You can tell her the chicken won’t be fast food. Mr. Stockwell is getting it from Strouds, a quality chicken restaurant. None of us will mind if she can’t speak English.”

Lucia looked surprised and blurted, “She can...”

But Lucas grabbed her arm. “She appreciates the offer, but Abuela isn’t coming.”

With an almost imperceptible grimace, Lucia pulled her arm free of Lucas’s hand. Then, she smiled at Beth and each of the kids. “We’ll see you at six-thirty. Thank you.”

As Wyatt, Missy, and Alana threw their towels and flip-flops near the table and splashed into the water, Beth watched Lucas and Lucia stride around the pool to the door of the building. Lucia walked a few steps behind Lucas, caught the door he opened, and entered after him. Beth shook her head and chose a chair under an umbrella where she could read her book and watch the grandkids. She read one page three times as her mind kept returning to their conversation with the twins. Where had Lucas learned to be so dominating? And Lucia—strong underneath, but would that be enough? And their grandmother... What was going on with the abuela?

Arnie and Beth transferred the food to platters and dishes to stay warm in the oven while their grandchildren showered and changed. At six-thirty on the nose, the doorbell rang. Lucas had combed his black hair into a side part style that looked too old for an eleven-year-old and long, as if he needed a haircut. He wore pressed grey shorts and a white polo shirt buttoned to the top. Beth couldn’t help wondering how

the family got clothes that fit if they never went shopping. On-line, maybe? Haircuts? No problem for Lucia, but Grandma must cut Lucas's hair the best she knew how.

Lucia looked prettier than ever in a red and white sundress. Someone, most likely her grandmother, had plaited her hair into long French braids interlaced with red ribbon. Beth had seen Wyatt look at her with special interest when her hair hung limp at poolside, but now his eyes practically bulged from their sockets. Missy rushed over to take Lucia by the hand and escort her into the living room. Both Missy and Alana fingered her braids and admired her dress.

Despite Arnie's invitation to "come on in," Lucas stood near the door surveying his new surroundings and looking hesitant about where to go until Wyatt called out from near the bedrooms. "Hey, Lucas, wanna see my collection of games?" He held up his omnipresent electronic tablet. "Do we have time to play a game before dinner, Grandpa?"

"Not much time, boys. Find a quick one. We don't want Grandpa's favorite chicken dinner to be ruined," Beth said. "You girls show Lucia around while we set the table. I'm pouring milk for all of you unless someone objects."

Psycho Cat had been enjoying an afternoon nap on Beth's and Arnie's bed but slipped into the living room when the doorbell rang. Being used to the cat, Beth's family paid no attention, but Lucia cast her eyes on the feline and couldn't seem to focus anywhere else even as the girls started into the bedroom hallway. She stopped a few feet from where Psycho Cat stared at her from under an end table.

"Can I...? I mean, do you think the cat would mind if I pet it?" Lucia asked everyone in general."

"He's a boy cat," Missy said, "and he's really nice." She called across the room to Beth and Arnie. "Is it okay if Lucia pets Sylvester?"

Beth set the milk carton on the table and walked toward the girls. "He usually loves to be made over, but let's make sure he's in a good mood. Right now, he seems to be hiding out under that table."

She knelt and reached between the table legs to scratch Psycho Cat's ears. When the cat blinked his appreciation of the caress, Beth motioned to Lucia to kneel beside her. "Put your hand out for Sylvester to sniff. If he knows you like him, he'll love for you to pet him."

Lucia's hand was accepted, and she grinned and cooed to him about what a nice animal he was as she rubbed her hand across his soft fur. "I've never petted a cat before," she said. "I petted a dog once when I was little, but Abuelo pulled me away and told me never to do that again." She turned back to rub his tummy with a wide smile on her face when Psycho Cat rolled onto his back.

Meanwhile, Lucas, who had stopped to watch his sister meet the feline, took a few steps toward the two on his way to where Wyatt waited. Psycho Cat leapt to his feet, fixed Lucas with a green-eyed stare, and hissed. Beth drew back and pulled Lucia with her. "Sorry, kids. I told you Sylvester was unpredictable. We'd better let him alone for now."

Psycho Cat scooted back into the master bedroom as Beth watched with her hands on her hips, until she was sure he wasn't going to attack anyone, and wondered what had caused such a reaction. Lucas, seemingly unaware that his approach had caused the cat's negative display, continued to the couch and was soon deep into an electronic duel with Wyatt.

Alana and Missy took Lucia into the guest room where they could be heard telling her all about the items Beth had purchased for them during their Prairie Village trip. Soon, Beth heard Lucia exclaim over the new clothing and accessories. As she set seven place settings on the extended dinette table, she

smiled to herself at the ease with which her grandchildren were able to help these socially inexperienced kids feel comfortable.

After Beth called everyone to the table, Missy started directing each one to a seat. “Mama says seating at a dinner party should be boy, girl, boy, girl.”

“That’s a good idea for an adult party,” Beth said, “but today let’s play it by ear.”

“Okay,” Missy said with easy adaptability. “Where do you want to sit, Lucia? I’m sitting beside you.”

There were lulls in the conversation during dinner, but whenever they happened, Arnie inserted comments about the Royals or golf or about a segment of the Robotics show they’d seen that afternoon, or he’d tell some silly joke about chickens crossing the road that got the kids chattering again. Beth noticed everyone but Missy ate at least two pieces of fried chicken, and both Wyatt and Lucas took seconds of mashed potatoes with big scoops of gravy. The gooey cinnamon rolls were a big hit. Arnie explained the Strouds’ family-style chicken dinner tradition to the out-of-towners.

“I know Alana’s been to Strouds before,” he said.

“Not just with you, Grandpa,” Alana said. “My family went with my best friend, Giselle, and her family. Giselle’s little sister, Willow, ate practically a whole plate of mashed potatoes and a whole cinnamon roll.”

“We’ve never eaten Strouds’ chicken before,” Lucas said. “I like it as much as Abuela’s fried chicken.”

“What’s your favorite restaurant, Lucas and Lucia?” Beth asked.

“Our grandfather said home cooking is always better,” Lucia said. “We don’t go to restaurants.”

“Never?” Alana asked.

“Just to McDonalds and Taco Bell, right?” Missy said with a finger full of caramel poised to go into her mouth and her feet swinging free below her adult-sized

chair. “Our mama says those aren’t restaurants. They’re fast food places. She takes us sometimes for a treat.”

Beth saw Lucas set his fork on his plate, knit his brow, and set his mouth, as if any minute he would discharge his grandfather’s biases from his mouth with the force of a shotgun. Missy’s innocent comment would be the target. Beth raised her eyebrows in Arnie’s direction. This kid needed to chill.

“Look at the time,” Beth said. “If you kids are going to finish your video before Alana’s parents come to pick her up, we’d better get it started. Everyone with sticky fingers needs to wash hands before sitting in the living room. Girls may use our bathroom, and boys get the guest bathroom. I’ll get the table cleared off.”

Beth stood up and reached across the table to start gathering plates, but watching the children rather than what she was doing, she knocked over a glass still half full of milk. Arnie got up to get a kitchen towel, and Lucia rushed back to mop up the spill with napkins left on the table.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Beth said. “Don’t mind me. I’m just a bit clumsy sometimes. You go on and wash up. We’ll clean this up.”

“But it’s my fault. I didn’t drink all my milk.”

“Goodness, that’s okay. I poured the amount I thought you’d want. You didn’t need to drink it all. Which gives me an idea. How about if you girls and I take some of the leftovers to your grandmother while the guys set up the video. Do you think she’d like that?”

Lucia looked uncertain, but she said, “Okay. I’ll get Alana and Missy.”

Beth threw away the paper napkins, cleaned the table with the wet towel Arnie brought and closed up the containers of leftovers. She gave each of the girls a box to carry. Wyatt was busy peppering Lucas with the background for *Captain America: The Avengers* when

Beth and the girls left. Better that way, Beth thought, than dealing with Lucas's reaction to taking *restaurant* food to his grandmother.

"Lucas has the remote in his pocket," Lucia explained while she first rang the doorbell and then pressed some keys on a keypad to unlock the door. "I don't want Abuela to be frightened that someone is breaking in." She called out as soon as the door opened. "Abuela, our neighbor, Mrs. Stockwell, has some food for you." She called out in English, which made Beth think maybe they spoke English to each other as much as they spoke Spanish. She'd been quite wrong about Mrs. Ramos not being able to understand her.

Lucia didn't invite them into the condo while they waited for her grandmother, but after almost a minute passed and she didn't appear, Beth said, "We could carry the boxes to the kitchen and stick them in the refrigerator for later. Maybe your grandmother is taking a nap."

"She might be watching TV and couldn't hear us. Grandmother enjoys having you bring food for us. Will you please wait here while I find her?" She motioned just inside the door.

"Of course." Beth, Alana, and Missy stepped inside holding their boxes of leftovers and let the door close. Lucia watched until they all stopped, as if she were afraid they'd follow her, before she set off to another part of the condo. Beth and the girls stood holding their boxes in silence, and Beth looked around.

The plush, carpeted room, long and narrow and about the size of Beth's kitchen and dining area, was decorated with formal Peruvian-style conversation groupings and paintings, drapes framing the windows on the far side. To the left of the hallway door a dark marble bar looked unused, its six ornate stools pushed in, each a precise distance from the next. The doorway that had swallowed Lucia opened next to the bar. On

the wall to their right, sliding glass doors led to the back balcony—the place where Grandfather had been before he fell, or had been pushed, to his death. Beth shuddered. Nothing she saw gave a clue to the facts of the drama. Maybe if she had Psycho Cat’s senses...

Beth had only a minute or two to think about why Viktor or Alexei or someone else with a Russian accent would have gone onto the balcony with Mr. Ramos rather than staying in this room before Lucia pushed her well-groomed grandmother in. Lucia introduced them. Rosa Ramos nodded at each with a vacant smile on her face, as if she’d never laid eyes on Beth or been told about the girls.

“Abuela, they brought you the rest of the delicious chicken dinner they served tonight,” Lucia said.

“Thank you very much,” Rosa Ramos said with a charming accent.

“You’re very welcome,” Beth said. “Can we warm it for your dinner?”

Rosa nodded, but Lucia said, “Grandmother ate dinner while Lucas and I were gone. We’ll put this in the refrigerator for tomorrow, if that’s okay with you.” She reached for the large box Beth held and then for the one Missy had, but Missy held on to hers.

“I’ll take it to the fridge for you. I want to see the rest of your house. Can we see your room?” Missy said.

Alana turned her eyes up to Beth’s with a shocked look. Beth said in a quiet way, “Missy, it’s not good manners to look around someone’s home unless you’re invited.”

Missy turned from Beth back to Lucia. “Are we invited?”

Alana and Lucia laughed, Beth smiled, and after a short delay, even Rosa Ramos broke into a big grin while gazing at her granddaughter. Lucia took her hand. “Is it okay if I show my new friends around our home, Abuela?”

“Si. Your friends brought food that smells good.”

Lucia led them all. Her grandmother rolled her chair along behind. A hallway led to a kitchen and large dining room on one side and three bedrooms and two bathrooms on the other. Lucia led the girls into her room and showed them her stuffed animals and her books. They peeked into the large exercise room with its shelves of balls, weights, and jump ropes and its basketball goal and other targets on the walls. At the end of the dining room, a large space looked out onto the front balcony. It had television-viewing space on one side, computer equipment and what looked to be a crafts table on the other.

“This looks like a busy room. It must be where you spend much of your time,” Beth said.

“It’s our school room,” Lucia said. “We get our lessons and work on them online or through videos, and Abuela sometimes works on her jewelry at her table while we study.” She picked up a pair of silver earrings strung with beads. “She makes necklaces and bracelets, too, and sometimes interesting collages of everyday things she finds. Abuelo brings—brought—home the stones and the silver wires for the jewelry and took Abuela’s creations to a business friend for his wife to sell in her booth at the Corinth Antique Mall.”

“Beautiful,” Beth said.

Alana surveyed the two computer stations. “That sounds awesome to have school on a computer. Except—you don’t have recess and don’t get to eat lunch and do projects with friends.” She stood looking at the computers, lost in thought.

“Mrs. Ramos,” Beth said, “we need to get back so the kids can watch a movie on television at my condo. Would you like to join them? I mean, we can visit while the kids watch.”

Rosa looked at Lucia, as if asking how to answer. Lucia glanced at her grandmother and shook her head just slightly. “No, Grandmother should stay here.”

Lucas would... That is, she would get tired, and she wouldn't be able to converse in English very well."

"Yes," Rosa said. "Eduardo won't approve, either."

"Wouldn't have, Abuela."

"He won't let me go visiting."

Beth stood with her mouth open for a few seconds but couldn't think of what to say.



## CHAPTER 18

### ABUELO'S RULES

Lucas looked up from the electronic game he and Wyatt were playing when Beth and the girls returned from delivering the food to his grandmother, but he said nothing. For the rest of the evening, the kids concentrated on watching the movie and nibbling at the popcorn Beth made for them.

Alana's parents arrived before *Captain America: The Avengers* was finished but waited until it was over to let Alana say good-bye to her cousins and friends. Lucas and Lucia left as soon as Alana was gone, and Beth watched them until they entered the penthouse and closed the door.

In their bedroom that night, out of earshot of Wyatt and Missy in the guest rooms, Beth told Arnie about Rosa Ramos's and Lucia's unusual behavior earlier in the evening. "Mrs. Ramos talked as if her husband is still alive and tells her what to do. Even worse, it sounded as if Lucas now rules the roost by continuing his grandfather's strict adherence to secrecy and hiding out, and for some reason both she and Lucia obey."

"We already know they're holed up in there, but why do you suspect the woman thinks her husband is still alive?"

“I don’t know that she thinks it for sure. She said he won’t let her come over here. Present tense. But maybe it was just a lapse, like when I drove straight to our old house from Meg’s a week after we moved here. Like the horse going home to the barn. On the other hand, Mrs. Ramos acted as if she didn’t recognize me, and I’ve talked to her at least a dozen times since her husband’s death.”

“Do you think she might be senile?”

“If she is, if she has even the beginnings of dementia, something has to be done. The kids can’t take care of themselves and their grandmother—physically, economically, or emotionally.”

“You’re right, but the authorities are probably all over it.”

“Not so far.”

Beth had trouble sleeping that night. Her concerns about the Ramos family wouldn’t let go. Should she call Detective Rinquire to ask if any steps were being taken to send them back to Peru? Were the police or the immigration authorities, or whoever oversaw such problems, aware the twins had a father somewhere? Beth didn’t want to cause trouble for them, but... She fell asleep with no idea what to do.

On Tuesday morning at 9:00, Meg arrived with her grandson, Todd. “Hi, Great Aunt Beth, are you ready to go? I wanna see the penguins and the polar bears, and the polar bears take naps in the afternoon. Grandma said so.”

“Almost ready, Toddy,” Beth said. “You remember Wyatt and Missy, your cousins from Oregon, don’t you?”

The seven-year-old seemed to have calmed down a little since the last time Beth saw him. At least he didn’t bounce on the couch or run hell-bent down the hallway chasing Psycho Cat. In fact, the cat had disappeared into his most remote hideout the minute

Todd tore through the door. Missy, almost ten, appraised the just-turned-seven youngster.

“I’m excited to see the penguins and polar bears, too. Do you remember when you came to visit us in Oregon, and we went to the wild animal park?” Missy asked.

“Um. I don’t know,” Todd said.

“He was not yet five then,” Meg said. “We have to get you kids together more often.”

At the zoo, Wyatt acted put-off by the younger children until Meg took him aside and asked him to be in charge of reading the information signs about each animal to them. He took the assignment to heart and even elaborated with more facts he knew about many of them. Beth soon became impressed by the knowledge her twelve-year-old grandson possessed.

After almost an hour of traipsing from one animal environment to another with Todd streaking ahead and around corners causing Meg to almost have a heart attack each time he disappeared, the group decided to ride the train that circled the zoo and ran through each exhibit. Wyatt sat with Missy and Todd on a bench in front of the one Beth and Meg shared. During the lengthy ride, Missy chattered to her young cousin in an endless account of her impressions of the sights. Wyatt looked around in silence.

Despite the cheerful surroundings, Beth still subconsciously wrestled with the problems of Rosa Ramos and her grandchildren. While the kids peeled off to one exhibit after another, she confided to Meg about her visit to the penthouse the evening before, Lucas’s attitude, and not knowing what, if anything, she should do. Meg sat with a frown of concern on her face as if she couldn’t quite grasp the whole issue.

Before Meg could say anything, Wyatt turned to face them. “I found out why Lucas acts the way he does to his sister and grandma,” he said.

“I didn’t mean for you to hear me talk about this, Wyatt,” Beth said. “You shouldn’t have to worry about such things.”

“Yeah, but while you took food to their grandmother, I asked Lucas why he didn’t want to come to dinner with us at first and how come he treated his twin sister the way he did.”

“What did he tell you?” Meg asked and adopted an innocent look when Beth nudged her arm.

“He said his grandpa was mean to all of them and especially to him. Whenever he didn’t do something exactly right, his grandpa would yell at him or even hit him. He wanted Lucas to be perfect so he could grow up and go to a good university and get rich and take care of the family. If Lucia did something better than Lucas, he got mad at both of them. And he yelled at their grandma about how she took care of them. Sometimes he hit her, too.”

“That’s terrible,” Beth said, “but I wonder why Lucas acts so domineering after knowing how it made him feel when his grandfather acted that way.”

“Lucas said he’s the man of the family now and has to make sure they all still do what they need to be doing so he can protect them. Or something like that.”

“Protect them from what? The world?” Meg said.

Todd turned around before Wyatt had a chance to answer, as if he had an answer. “Grandma, do you know where we are?”

“We’re at the zoo, as far as I know, Toddy,” Meg said.

“I mean *where* at the zoo.”

“Where at the zoo *are* we?”

“We’re in Africa. Don’t you see the elephants and giraffes?”

“Now I do. I wasn’t paying enough attention. Where did you learn that elephants and giraffes live in Africa?”

“On television. I watch a show on Saturday morning that tells all about animals and where they live.”

“I watch that show, too,” Missy said. “I don’t watch the cartoons any more. Do you know what animals live in South America?”

Wyatt broke out of a contemplative mood to interrupt. “From television and videos—that’s how Lucas said he and Lucia find out about the world. His grandpa told him he can learn all he needs to know, for now, from schoolwork and T.V.”

“Their grandma, too?” Missy asked. “She doesn’t get to go anywhere. Lucas won’t let her.”

Wyatt shrugged. “I don’t know. He didn’t tell me why his grandma can’t go out.”

The train ride ended, and they walked around for about ten more minutes before it became clear Todd would whine the whole time if they tried to go farther. The youngster had expended his energy at the beginning of the outing. It was hard enough getting him to walk back to the parking lot. On the ride to Brookside, Beth asked Todd if he’d like to go to the pool with Wyatt and Missy after lunch. An enthusiastic *yes* was followed by a boastful discussion about where the children had taken lessons and how well they could swim. A lull in the conversation followed, and Todd fell asleep.

Beth lined all three kids along the kitchen bar to help prepare their lunch of pitas topped with her leftover marinara sauce, mozzarella cheese, Canadian bacon pieces, and a choice of chopped vegetables. Todd put a bunch of cheese on a smattering of sauce. The others were more venturesome. Beth put the creations into the oven and assigned Missy to watch until the cheese bubbled. Missy wandered off to watch Wyatt teach Todd how to play a video game until Beth smelled the distinct smell of sizzling Italian spices and rushed to the oven. She forgave Missy for the lapse, and the savory pizzas, fruit slices topped with whipped

cream, and fresh lemonade revitalized everyone to the point that the kids trooped off to change for the pool around one-thirty.

The sky was overcast, and the only people they saw when they reached the pool area were four older adults swimming laps. Todd threw the Star Wars beach towel Meg had given him onto the cement and plunged down the steps into the water. Wyatt and Missy placed their plain towels on chairs and followed. After about five minutes of bumping into the kids trying to outdo each other with their pool antics, all but one of the adult swimmers climbed out of the pool and onto lawn chairs to dry off. They all gave knowing looks to Beth and Meg, sitting under an umbrella nearby. The fourth swimmer gave up after challenging Wyatt to a race across the pool and losing. With a scowl on his face, the potbellied man walked past the women and plopped onto a chaise lounge.

While the kids frolicked like frisky seals in the pool, Beth turned to Meg. “I can’t get Lucia and Lucas off my mind, but I don’t know what to do. Should I call Detective Rinquire and tell him Rosa Ramos may be losing her memory?”

“Are you sure it’s her memory, or is it her lack of English proficiency and her isolation? Those could make her seem odd to you. I remember students whose parents wouldn’t come to parent-teacher conferences because they felt unsure about their communication skills. The school district finally provided a translator the parents could request to be present.”

“That’s what I thought it was at first, but last night she seemed to understand what we said and could reply to my questions in English. She just seemed unsure about what was going on. Lucia had to remind her of things she should have known.”

“Like what?”

“When I asked Rosa if she’d like for me to heat up the food we took over, she nodded. But then Lucia told me her grandmother had already eaten dinner. That’s a little thing. Rosa could have been trying to be polite. It seemed to me, though, that she didn’t remember having eaten her dinner. Then there’s Lucas and how he won’t let his grandmother visit us. She thinks it’s her husband who is still prohibiting her to socialize.”

“Is there something Detective Rinquire could do? Maybe you need to get in touch with social services.”

“I’m not sure what I’d say. The grandfather was apparently abusive, but he’s gone. So far, all I have is a feeling that something’s wrong with the grandmother. I need to visit again. And, I wish I could figure out how to get Psycho Cat into the penthouse. He accepted the twins when they came to our condo, but he paws at the penthouse door as if he can sense something bad, either about the door or about what’s inside that door. It might relate to Mr. Ramos’s murder.”

“Oh, right. As if they’ll let that unpredictable fuzzleball into their elegant abode.” Meg turned toward the kids in the pool and tapped her fingers on the arms of her chair as if the idea was too ridiculous to consider.

Beth watched her for a couple of minutes and then also turned to watch the kids. Maybe if she stopped thinking about it for a while, a solution would pop into her head. That’s what Arnie told her—don’t be impatient; let your problems percolate, and you’ll come up with a plan. Good thought. Her grandchildren should be her priority right now, anyway.

She watched the water churn as the kids swam through each other’s legs and performed flips in the pool and thought about how she and Arnie used to horseplay in the water. Just as Beth leaned forward and giggled at Missy, who was trying to get a reluctant Todd to dive into the water from her submerged shoulders, Meg clutched her arm.

“This may sound crazy, but I have an idea,” Meg said.

“An idea about what?” Beth asked, still smiling about the kids.

“A plan to get Psycho Cat into the penthouse.”

Beth lost the smile and turned sideways to gawk at her sister. “Really? Out with it, then.”

Meg related a sneaky but clever plan, in which Meg herself volunteered to play an important part.



## CHAPTER 19

### **THE PLAN**

**B**eth was considering when they would have a chance to put Meg's plan into action when she saw Lucas and Lucia walking toward the pool. Wyatt noticed them and waved. Then, Missy popped out of the water and saw her brother waving. She pivoted and pushed off with her feet so that her lithe body skimmed through the water to the edge of the pool.

"Hi, Lucia. Hi, Lucas. We have a different cousin with us today. His name's Todd." Missy made a vague gesture in Todd's direction but kept her eyes on Lucia. "We need another girl in here."

"Third cousin, technically third step-cousin," Meg whispered, mostly to herself.

"Cousin is fine." Beth kept her voice low, too, as she half-seriously scolded her sister for her tendency to be so precise while she waved the twins toward their table. "You can put your towels and shoes on one of these chairs, if you'd like," she told them. "Meg, Lucas and Lucia Ramos are our neighbors. Lucas and Lucia, this is my sister, Margaret Knells, Todd's grandmother."

Both children gave Meg a shy smile and a hello, but then Lucia looked at Beth. "Our grandfather wanted

us to be named Ramos, but Abuela told me our surname is actually Flores, Lucas and Lucia Flores.”

“Your father’s last name—of course,” Beth said, “I’m sorry. Meg, meet Lucia and Lucas Flores.”

Lucas gave Lucia the hard stare Beth had seen before, but Lucia ignored him, threw down her things, and strode to the pool where Missy was waiting with a big smile on her face. Wyatt got out of the pool long enough to dig the ring toss game out of Beth’s beach bag and organized the five children into teams. Todd and Missy were given short-toss handicaps. Beth could feel her heart swell with pride. Wyatt reminded her of Arnie, the way he tried to make sure everyone was included. Although, when only he and Missy were involved, it was sometimes a different story.

While she watched the game, Beth thought again about Meg’s plan to get Psycho Cat into the penthouse and wondered if sibling rivalry is present in cat families. If so, it was a good thing they hadn’t adopted one of the big cat’s brothers or sisters. Sylvester would dominate a sibling like a sheep dog over his flock. That feisty cat could surely break into the penthouse. Wait, though. Getting him in was one thing, but what would she watch for after he was in, and for how long could he stay there to sniff around? She had visions of chasing a large streak of yellow fur from room to room while Rosa Ramos screamed that she was allergic. Disaster. Beth sighed. No second thoughts, she told herself. A plan is a plan.

An hour later, Beth called Arnie’s cell phone to find out if he was back yet from the appointment he had at the office that morning. The kids had eaten all the snacks she packed, and Todd had been back and forth from the pool several times with various complaints—a stubbed toe, a grievance about the older kids not letting him win, a sit-out when the boys were racing, the girls were doing handstands, and all were ignoring him, and so on. Now he was nagging Meg to take him

inside. If Arnie could supervise at the pool, this would be the perfect time for her and Meg to visit the penthouse without contending with Lucas—or with Arnie, for that matter.

“When Grandpa comes, Aunt Meg and I are taking Todd inside,” Beth told Wyatt and Missy after she put her phone back into her bag.

“We can stay by ourselves until he gets here,” Wyatt said. “We’re all good swimmers.”

“There’s a pool rule that there must be an adult with us,” Lucas said. “There’s no one else here.”

It was true. The three women and the man the kids had displaced from the pool had gone in some time before.

“Then how do you and Lucia get to come to the pool by yourselves?” Wyatt asked.

“We watch until we see there are adults at the pool.”

“When we used to come with our abuelo,” Lucia said, “we waited until the pool area was empty. But since—I mean, now, we watch until we see people.”

“Abuela keeps an eye on us from the back balcony,” Lucas said. “Grandfather cut a peep hole in the side wall when we were small so we could see out. Now, our grandmother can watch from her wheelchair.”

They all looked up at the tenth-story balcony.

“Is she watching now?” Missy asked. “I don’t see her.”

“She might be,” Lucia said, “if she remem... Abuela can stand for a few minutes if she wants to, and sometimes we see her up there leaning over the rail on the front.”

Arnie came striding across the cement toward them wearing his swim trunks and a T-shirt. “Well, there you are my tanned family and friends,” he boomed. “Hi, Meg. How was the zoo?” He gave her a hug. “Todd, my friend, I see you’re now a young man. We’d better shake hands.”

Todd replaced his pout with a grin and gave Arnie an animated handshake. The women gathered their belongings, told Arnie the kids shouldn't stay out any more than half an hour longer, and took off, Todd lagging behind with the large towel he wrapped around himself dragging on the cement. Beth whispered to Meg that this was their chance to try her penthouse infiltration plan.

When she stepped into the building out of the humid summer heat, the blast of air-conditioned air hit Beth like a runaway iceberg. On the way to the elevator, she looked down into her carry-all bag to find her sweater and looked up just in time to see Viktor's friend, Alexei, exit the elevator and rush through the lobby and out the front door. She stopped and watched until he disappeared down the walk toward the parking spaces on the side of the building.

"I can't hold this door open forever." Meg said from the elevator. "What's the matter? Who was that?"

Beth glanced down at Todd who at that moment personified the expression "Little pitchers have big ears." "Um, just an acquaintance," she said and wiggled her eyebrows toward the boy. "I was surprised to see him here."

"I get it. Okay, you'll have to tell me more about him sometime."

The elevator went straight to the tenth floor, Beth reflected. She should have suspected that the mechanism had been controlled by the reclusive penthouse dwellers—the only ones who'd want to control who came to this floor.

Meg put her hand on Todd's shoulder. "Come on, Todd, we need to hurry and change you into dry clothes so you can help us take Psycho Cat out for an afternoon walk on his leash. Okay?"

"Walk him like a dog?" Todd asked.

"Very much like a dog. Sound like fun?"

"Yeah."

Beth held the foil pan of her improvised pita pizza in one hand and rang the penthouse doorbell with the other while Psycho Cat pawed at the door. The plan had changed a little since Todd became a participant in that he, rather than Meg, held the cat's leash. After a short wait, Rosa Ramos answered the door, and Psycho Cat rushed forward, pulling Todd.

"Uh, oh. Grab the leash, Meg," Beth said as she gripped the pan in both hands and stepped aside. "This cat is so curious."

Meg caught the leash and unclipped it from the harness in a surreptitious manner. Psycho Cat darted into the room. Meg put her hand over her mouth and looked at the leash in such a surprised manner that anyone would have thought she was completely taken off-guard. "It came loose," she said. "Sorry."

Beth expected Psycho Cat to blast into the room and nose around, but instead he stopped in front of the wheelchair, and pawed first at Rosa's feet and then at her legs. The woman reached down and scratched his head. Psycho Cat made the same low sound deep in his throat as he had when he pawed at the door, but Rosa didn't take offense. Instead, she bent forward, reached out with both hands, and tried to lift the cat. He proved to be too heavy. But rather than shy away as he would have with a youngster who tried to grab him, when Rosa sat back into her chair, Psycho Cat jumped into her lap. She stroked his back and cooed to him in Spanish.

Meanwhile, Beth, Meg, and even Todd stood in the doorway and watched with open mouths. This was certainly not what Beth or Meg had expected. Now, how would Psycho Cat point out clues having to do with the murder when he was stuck on Rosa's lap? After a short period of watching the cat purr under the lady's caresses, Beth found her voice.

“Well, it looks as if you like cats,” she said. “This is Sylvester, our unpredictable and self-confident kitty. We were about to take him for a walk.”

“I had cats when I was a youngster,” Rosa said. “I love cats, especially Chasca. She was named for the Inca goddess of dawn, you know. But I don’t have a pet cat here.” She looked around as if hoping her statement wasn’t true and she’d see a kitty lurking on a sofa or padding through a doorway.

“No,” Beth said in a soft voice. “I don’t believe you have a cat. You can pet Sylvester while I take these pizzas to your refrigerator. Okay?”

“Pizza? Thank you.” Rosa looked at Meg and Todd. “Hola. Isn’t this a nice cat?”

“Sylvester,” Todd said and stepped forward to help Rosa pet the cat.

Psycho Cat eyed Todd with suspicion but put his chin back onto Rosa’s leg when Todd stroked gently. Meg smiled and patted Todd’s shoulder. Beth hesitated long enough to consider Rosa and her wheelchair. The woman might have been able to stand for a minute or two to look down over the balcony rail at the pool, but was she able to supervise two pre-teens? Psycho Cat may not have given them a clue regarding the murder, but he had given her a little more insight into her confused condition. Is that what the cat had been trying to tell them by scratching at the door every time they went past? It may not have been about the condo break-ins or about the murder at all. Beth would have to try something else if she wanted a clue to the death of Rosa’s husband.

She decided to be direct. What harm could it do? It was probable Rosa wouldn’t remember the conversation for long. “Has Detective Rinquire talked to you lately?” she asked.

“Detective Rinquire.” Rosa looked up at her with a blank expression that turned into a frown of concentration. With one hand still on Psycho Cat’s

back to steady him, she tilted her body slightly and reached into her pants pocket to retrieve a folded piece of paper. She unfolded it onto the arm of her chair and read. The entire process took less than half a minute. Her frown vanished, and she gazed around at all of them.

The message on the paper must have been written in Spanish because Rosa seemed to translate as she recited. "As I said before, I heard speaking...talking. A man spoke with a Russian voice...accent. I left to watch TV. Then, I heard shout...scream, I mean. It took some minutes to wheel myself to the balcony, but no one was there. I looked down below and saw Eduardo." Rosa bobbed her head as if sure she'd told it correctly.

Todd stopped petting the cat and looked up at Meg with raised eyebrows as if sure he'd heard something bad but not quite understanding its import. Meg caught Beth's eye and gave her a sharp look.

Beth patted Rosa's hand and lifted Psycho Cat off her lap. "I'm so glad you like Sylvester, Rosa," she said, "but he needs some exercise this afternoon before being cooped up in my condo for the evening. Todd, would you and your Grandma please walk him down to the lobby?" She held the cat while Meg clipped the leash back on. "I'll follow in a few minutes, and we'll take him outside for a while."

Todd took hold of the leash and gave it a slight tug. Psycho Cat followed him to the elevator doors like an obedient child. Beth closed the penthouse door with a gentle push and turned toward Rosa.

"I guess you told Detective Rinquire all you know about Eduardo's death. How could you see the pavement at the base of the building from your wheelchair? I can't see directly below when I'm seated on my balcony."

Rosa smiled and started wheeling herself toward her back balcony. Beth followed and watched as her

neighbor unlocked the door and slid it open. The door track, which formed an obstacle one must step over in Beth's condo, had been recessed into the flooring so the wheelchair glided easily over it and onto the balcony. As she stepped outside, Beth saw three plants hanging above head level near the railing and a step stool that Mr. Ramos must have used when watering them. She also saw a patio table with three chairs and a space where Rosa must park her wheelchair.

Rosa wheeled to the wall at the side of the balcony and pointed to an opening which had been carved through the cement. "This is where I can see out." She leaned back so Beth could peek through.

Sure enough, the opening was angled through the cement so Beth could see the entire pool. Rosa could watch the children from up here. It wasn't as clear whether she could have seen her husband's body directly below. Beth tried to position her head so she could see the spot where the body had been found. The area had been cleaned, and she couldn't be sure, but the faint blood stain on the pavement just outside the pool patio fence didn't fall into her line of sight until she stood and peered over the front rail. From that position, she could see that awful reminder of death even from this far up.

A grunt from behind Beth caused an involuntary bolt of adrenalin in anticipation of a push from behind that could send her sprawling over the rail and spiraling ten stories to the ground. She backed away in a panic but immediately realized Rosa Ramos had made the noise while exerting effort to push herself to a standing position from her wheelchair. She stood for a long moment before she reached out for the top of the wall. There, she looked over as Beth had. It was hard to tell what she might be thinking, and Beth didn't ask.

When Rosa plopped back into her chair, she pulled out and opened up the paper she kept in her pocket. “Detective Rinquire, the American detective,” she said with a hard look on her face that reminded Beth of the look her father gave her when she did something mean or deceitful as a child, a look worse than any punishment. “A good detective will discover the truth.”

“Do you know the truth?” Beth asked.

Rosa folded her paper and gazed up at Beth. But her eyes had regained their mild, blank appearance.

In the lobby, Al stepped out from behind his desk to hold the doors for Beth and her crew. “Well, what’s this, another young person to help walk your cat, Mrs. Stockwell?”

“Al, you might remember meeting my sister, Meg, who visits sometimes. This is her grandson, Todd. He’s in charge of Sylvester today, at least until he gets tired.”

Al nodded to Meg and grinned at Todd. “Hold on tight, young sir. I’ve seen that cat pull certain people down the steps and into the flower beds.”

Todd put both hands on the leash as he exited. “Don’t worry. I’ve got him.” Psycho Cat pulled Todd across the stoop, slowed to a dainty prance down the steps, and then charged into a flower bed.

“Oh, dear,” Meg said as she ran down to help.

Beth and Al giggled as they watched grandmother and grandson try to persuade the cat to go back to the sidewalk. Then, Beth turned serious. “My renter, Hélène, had a visitor today—a friend of her husband’s named Alexei. I was surprised to see him. Has he been visiting here very much lately that you know of?”

“Oh, sure, Alexei. Nice guy. He’s been here often for the past few days to see Hélène and her little daughter. I think he’s been helping since... Well, you know.” He grimaced. “Guess I shouldn’t have told you. I’m not

supposed to give out information about residents' visitors."

"It's okay. She's my renter and my friend. Speaking of helping—I'd better go help with Psycho Cat. See you." Beth caught a strap of her sandal on the edge of the door in her haste and fell sideways.

Al caught her, helped her stand straight, and then pulled the door open wider until Beth was well outside its swing range. "You be careful, now."

"Thanks." Beth's smile was sheepish as she turned to pay attention to each footfall until she reached Meg. It took all three of them to coax Psycho Cat out of the flowers. "Silly cat. Now, he's wasted a bunch of his walking time by being contrary. Right, Todd?"

"Silly Sylvester," Todd said as he determinedly gripped the leash while the cat jerked into a run and then came to an abrupt stop within the space of two and a half minutes.

Silly me, Beth thought, for believing that H el ene wouldn't have anything to do with Alexei after she found out about his money deal. Could Alexei believe she had money to give him? Or, could it be that the two of them conspired against Viktor? After all, H el ene would have had access to paper that Viktor had touched. She could have given it to Alexei, or worse, written that incriminating letter herself. Beth remembered the way Alexei looked at H el ene the night he came to her condo for dinner. Did the two of them plan to get rid of Viktor so they could be together?

No, H el ene could just divorce Viktor if that were the case. But, not if Alexei had committed crimes Viktor would reveal if Alexei stole H el ene away. Beth shook her head. She could become dizzy thinking this way—what if...maybe... She needed answers if she were to help the innocent victims of this tragedy. But who was guilty, and who was innocent?

Arnie, Wyatt, and Missy were back at the condo by the time the cat walkers returned, and Meg said it was

time to take Todd home. There was no chance to discuss the astonishing revelations of the day with Meg. But it was probably for the best. Beth didn't want one of the kids to overhear them talking about murder suspects.



## CHAPTER 20 OUT AND ABOUT

For the rest of the evening, Beth thought now and then about her day's discoveries regarding the Ramos death—she didn't like to call it a murder, even to herself, because whenever she did, she found herself imagining Viktor Lutsenko as a cold-blooded killer. After all, there *was* enough evidence to keep him in jail for that crime. That evening, though, her priority was to have a good time with her grandchildren who were scheduled to fly back to Oregon in another day and a half.

Arnie suggested they walk over to Jalapenos, a casual Mexican restaurant in Brookside, for dinner. The kids agreed. They were all tired, and the hot, heavy atmosphere of the long summer day seemed to permeate the tenth story condo despite the air conditioning. Beth didn't want to further heat up the kitchen by cooking, and a spicy meal might brighten her dejected mood. Out on the sidewalk, though, the afternoon heat had turned to a clamminess that foretold an approaching storm.

"It's a good thing Jalapenos is only two blocks away," Arnie said. "I'm already dripping with sweat."

“Me too,” Wyatt said. “It doesn’t get this hot in Oregon.”

“It probably does, but it isn’t as humid in the summer there,” Beth said. “The humidity makes eighty-four degrees feel like ninety-two.”

Despite the heat, Missy was skipping ahead of the group. She turned and walked back to talk to them. “Do you think Lucia and Lucas ever get to go out to eat?”

There was a moment of silence before Wyatt spoke up. “No, stu...” He glanced at Beth. “No, they told us they don’t get to go anywhere except to the pool and sometimes to the grocery store.”

“Maybe they didn’t know anyone to go with before. We could ask their grandma if they could go somewhere with us tomorrow. Lucia gave me her cell phone number in case we wanted to call and ask them to go to the pool or something.”

Beth turned to Arnie. “I talked to Rosa Ramos today. Actually, she might consent for the twins to go somewhere with us tomorrow or even come with them, if we approach it right. We were going to talk about what to do tomorrow. It could be something that could include Lucas and Lucia.”

Arnie raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure Mrs. Ramos will go for it, but it’s okay with me if you can talk her into it.”

“Yea,” Missy said, raising an arm as if she’d just won an Olympic gold medal. She turned and skipped on.

“Stop at the corner so we can cross the street together, please.” Beth called out.

Wyatt walked beside Arnie with a sober expression. Arnie patted him on the back. “Is it okay with you to include Lucas and Lucia in our plans for tomorrow? We sure don’t have to. It will be your last full day with us, after all.”

“Yeah. ‘Course it’s okay by me. I like Lucas and um... (His voice became soft.) ...Lucia. But Lucas is the problem. He makes the decisions about what they can do, and he goes by what his grandfather used to tell them.”

“I noticed that,” Arnie said. “But your grandma can be pretty persuasive. Would you like her to at least ask?”

“Sure.” Wyatt grinned and gave his grandpa a man-to-man understanding kind of look.

“Don’t count your chickens, yet, you two,” Beth said. “All I can do is promise to try.”

They passed the elementary school across the street, a place Lucas and Lucia could see from their balcony but had never entered. They crossed busy Meyer Boulevard and walked past the small community park with its curving path shaded by tree branches heavy with their summer greenery, benches perfectly placed for people watching, and tennis courts that beckoned skilled and inexperienced players of all ages. In fact, as they passed, Beth saw hard-hitting men playing singles on one court and four youngsters batting a tennis ball back and forth across the net like a badminton birdy on the other.

The block past the park held a bank, a grocery store, several restaurants, and some specialty shops. Had Lucas and Lucia stared through the towering penthouse windows at all the activity outside of their confined space and day-dreamed about how it might feel to experience it themselves? Or, had their grandfather programmed them to believe they could live it all vicariously through their electronic media?

At Jalapenos, they ate chips with salsa, tacos, enchiladas, and burritos with their elbows on the table and extra napkins. The air, walls, and floors were infused with that delicious Tex-Mex smell that came from frying taco shells, cumin, cilantro, jalapeno

peppers, spicy rice, and steaming refried beans, not to mention a little beer and margarita mix. Colorful maracas, sombreros, Mexican-style tiles on the walls, and guitar music sounding through overhead speakers all helped encourage a good mood.

With both hands, Wyatt held a huge taco with shredded lettuce and cheese spilling over the top, ready to take a bite, when he lowered it to his plate. “Are you going to call Lucas’s and Lucia’s grandmother tonight, Grandma?”

“It might work better if I go see her,” Beth said. “I’ll take Sylvester. She seems to soften up around Mr. Psycho Cat. But we all have to decide first what we want to do tomorrow. I have a list of places I thought you two might enjoy—things like a Royals game, Worlds of Fun amusement park, Oceans of Fun or Schlitterbahn Waterparks, the LEGOLAND Experience, or Science City, which is a hands-on science museum.”

“Our car won’t hold seven people. We’d have to take two cars,” Arnie said.

“We could both drive, but I don’t think Rosa Ramos is ready for a day at a waterpark or an amusement park.”

“Anyway, we’ve been to LEGOLAND and Disneyland in California,” Missy said.

“And we have waterparks and the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry near where we live,” Wyatt added. “I’d like to go to a Royals game, but Mrs. Ramos probably couldn’t do that.”

“The game tomorrow doesn’t start until seven o’clock in the evening,” Arnie said. “Just the four of us could do that after we do something during the day.”

“We could walk to the cool store where we bought the pool game the first day we were here,” Missy said. “And then get an ice-cream cone.”

Beth smiled. “Of course. If they’ve never been anywhere, they should start small. We could eat lunch

at Bella Napoli. It's just one block from here and has outdoor seating or tables indoors. They make yummy pizzas and pastas, and there's an ice-cream shop next door. How's that sound? We could look around the New Dime Store, maybe Brookside Toy and Science, and other shops, too. Who votes for that plan?"

"I do." Missy raised her hand as if in a classroom and then lowered it when Wyatt, sitting across the table, smirked at her. She stuck her tongue out at him and then turned to Beth as if the interplay hadn't happened. "Can Alana come, too? Do you think I can help push the wheelchair?"

Beth fought back a laugh and then an inclination to correct the children for their rudeness to each other. "We'll call and ask your Aunt Janae and Alana. But I don't know about pushing the wheelchair. Let's first find out whether Mrs. Ramos and the twins will come with us. How about you guys? What do you think of the idea?" She looked across the table at the two of them and waited for an answer.

"It's okay, I guess," Wyatt said. "But Lucas might not like the shopping part."

Arnie considered for a moment and then put a hand on Wyatt's shoulder. "How about we guys buy a soccer ball at the New Dime Store and kick it around in the park while you gals take Mrs. Ramos to 'other shops?'"

Wyatt's face brightened. "That'd be awesome."

Now it was up to Beth to convince Lucas that his family should do this. The more she thought about it, the queasier she felt. Not good with a stomach full of tortilla chips and spicy food. Where was Meg, the former teacher with kid-convincing skills, when she needed her?



## CHAPTER 21

### **MAKING CONNECTIONS**

**B**eth kept half an eye on the darkening sky through the storefront window of the restaurant, and when they stepped onto the sidewalk after the big meal, sprinkles spit in their faces. The wind had picked up, the temperature had fallen ten degrees, and the greenish-gray clouds, looking as if they were only five feet above Arnie's head, made the summer dusk arrive three hours early.

"No lightning, at least," Beth said. "If we hurry, we might be lucky and make it back before it pours."

The kids loped ahead, she and Arnie discovering what they thought to be their fast-paced walking speed to be lame in comparison to the youthful vigor. Wyatt reached the corner with Missy close behind when a clap of thunder shook the atmosphere like a locomotive rattling past with its horn blaring. A second or two later, a bolt of lightning caused Missy to shriek, and she ran back to clutch Beth's and Arnie's hands. As if the electricity had cracked open the clouds, the downpour began, and Arnie yelled to Wyatt that he should watch for traffic and then go, go, go.

Beth and Arnie, resigned to becoming drenched, splashed down the sidewalk and across the street at a

fast walk, Missy holding on for all she was worth. Another clap of thunder and they picked up the pace as they neared the visitor parking lot at the side of the condo building. Beth kept her head down, not only to watch her footing so she wouldn't trip over an uneven place with her usual klutziness and pull Missy and Arnie with her, but also to keep the driving rain out of her eyes. She looked up when a car zipped out of the lot and turned into the street about ten feet in front of them.

At first merely startled, Beth dropped Missy's hand and slowed to a stop when she recognized the person at the steering wheel. "Arnie, did you see who was driving that car?" she said when he and Missy slowed to wait for her.

"No."

"It was Alexei. I'm sure of it."

"Who's Alexei?" Missy asked.

"Just an acquaintance," Arnie said and then wrapped his arm around Missy's shoulder. "Come on, Beth. We need to get inside."

Ti'esha, the evening, six to eleven o'clock, security guard, rushed to the condo doors to hold one open for them. "Thank you so much, Ti'esha," Beth said. "This is no night to be fumbling around for door keys."

"No problem. You guys are soaked. Don't you usually drive into the garage?"

"We walked here from the Mexican restaurant," Missy volunteered. "It wasn't raining when we went there."

"Well, no wonder, then."

With his hand on Missy's shoulder and a wave of thanks to Ti'esha, Arnie walked toward the elevator, where Wyatt was already waiting. Beth lagged behind.

"I thought I saw my renter's friend, Alexei, drive out of the parking lot when we went past," she said. "Do you know how long he was here this afternoon?"

The sturdy young woman slid behind her desk, her elaborate braids swinging. She avoided eye contact with Beth. "I'm sorry. I can't give you that information."

"But... My renter has had some...uh, problems, and I just want to make sure... I don't want her to have more problems. You see?"

"If you were a cop or someone with official authorization, I could show you the register. Otherwise, it's a privacy issue, even if she's your renter."

"I understand. Rules are rules." Beth put on her best confirmatory smile. "See you later." Guess she'd have to ask H el ene about Alexei's recent visits. She trotted over to the elevator before Arnie lost patience and allowed the doors to close.

In the condo, Missy went to the guest room, changed into dry clothes, and paced from one door to the other in the hallway. "Hurry up. We need to go over and ask Lucas and Lucia and their grandma if they want to go to Brookside with us tomorrow."

Wyatt shouted through the closed door of the bathroom, "Hold your britches. They aren't going anywhere. Remember? They stay home."

Beth called through her bedroom door as she slipped her feet into dry sandals. "Missy, I want to use a hair dryer on you before we go anywhere."

"Ooh, pooh! They'll go to bed before we get there," Missy whined.

Beth opened the door with a hairbrush and hair dryer in her hands. "Sweetie, it looks like ten o'clock outside, but it's really only seven. Too early for bed. I'll dry your hair, and you can help me call Alana to find out if she can come with us tomorrow, even if Lucia and Lucas can't."

"Yeah. Let's call Alana." Missy stood by the guest room dresser while Beth dried and combed her fine, silky curls.

The child's hair reminded Beth of her own youthful locks. Only she'd always gone to great lengths to pull the unruly stuff back into a tight pony tail or use a hot iron to achieve the long, straight look of her day. Missy was still young. Beth held onto a small hope Missy wouldn't give up her natural look as she matured. But Missy probably would want whatever the latest look turned out to be when she entered high school and college.

Over the phone, Beth and Janae decided Janae would bring Alana to the condo by nine-thirty the next morning. Beth's talented daughter-in-law had an art gallery and studio in the Crossroads art district of Kansas City, and her hours were flexible.

"Alana was going to have to hang out at the studio with me for a few hours tomorrow and be bored to tears," Janae said. "I'm glad she'll get to visit some more with her cousins instead."

All four of them gathered in the living room as Beth prepared to trek across the hall to the penthouse. "I'll ask Rosa Ramos, first," Beth said, "but, something tells me she won't accept or reject our invitation. She'll look at the kids, and Lucas will decide."

"Would it help if we all go and I ask?" Arnie cocked his head as if considering the mindsets of his neighbors.

"Lucas might accept if I'm there," Wyatt said. "I'll tell him about our plan to play soccer in the park. He likes to watch soccer on TV." He turned his mouth up on one side and mumbled, "Course he'll be great the first time he plays."

Beth understood how her competitive grandson would be jealous of a younger boy who surpassed him in athletic ability. She gave Wyatt a tiny hug. "Fantastic. We'll go over together. Grandpa and Wyatt will do the inviting. As a matter of fact, I think Sylvester should join us. Mrs. Ramos and Lucia love

the kitty.” She looked around the room. “Where is that ol’ Psycho Cat?”

The kids took off in different directions to look, but Arnie frowned. “Wait a second,” he said. “I believe it was only yesterday evening that Psycho Cat threw a cat fit and went into hiding when Lucas went near him. If he’s your main obstacle to this outing with the kids...”

“You’re right.” Beth hadn’t explained to Arnie how Psycho Cat had growled at Rosa, or at least at her wheelchair, and then ended up charming her into being her authentic self while Todd and Meg were there. The difference was that the cat hadn’t made up to Lucas the whole previous evening. “Maybe we shouldn’t chance the cat messing up the *plan*. You do have a plan, right?”

Arnie grinned. “I’ll think one up on the way down the hall. Never mind finding Sylvester, kids. We don’t want to disrupt the cat’s nap and take him visiting while he’s in a bad mood.”

Arnie shook hands with Rosa Ramos, a toothy smile on his face. He held her hand longer than necessary. “Beth and your grandchildren didn’t prepare me for what an attractive woman you are. Pleasant, too, I’ll wager.”

Lucia beamed at her grandmother as the lady’s cheeks grew pink and a flirty smile, hinting at her younger self, appeared on her face. Lucas gave Arnie a strange look that suggested he didn’t understand that kind of talk around his grandmother. Beth smiled to herself. She understood Arnie’s act. On the other hand, he was telling the truth about Rosa being a pretty woman.

Wyatt stood with Beth and Missy, taking it all in, and he peered at his grandfather with appreciation as Arnie continued. “My grandchildren have enjoyed yours so much this week, and tomorrow is their last

full day here. We gave them choices of expensive theme parks and interactive venues for tomorrow, but they..." He reached over to each one, pulled them close, and put his arms around their shoulders. "...want to spend their last day with Lucas, Lucia, and you, Mrs. Ramos."

Arnie looked each one in the eye as he said a name. Then, he paused to smile and kiss Missy and then Wyatt on the tops of their heads while his words sunk in. Missy hugged her grandpa, and Wyatt rubbed his hair with a fake-looking smile plastered on his face. Beth bit her lower lip to stave off a chuckle and an eye roll. Arnie could be so charmingly melodramatic and make it seem sincere. She hoped it would work.

Beth watched Lucas while Arnie explained their idea of walking over to the Brookside shops and then going out to lunch at Bella Napoli. Wyatt added the part about buying a soccer ball and kicking it around while the women shopped.

Wiggling with excitement, Missy piped up in her enthusiastic, the-best-thing-ever voice. "And the restaurant is Italian. It has pizza and stuff. And we can get ice-cream from the shop next door after lunch." She looked up at Arnie who pressed his lips together and nodded.

"If we're still hungry, I mean," Missy added. Her eyes brightened, and she turned to Lucia. "Alana gets to go with us, too." She paused again, and when there was no immediate response, she grew still and spoke again with sincerity. "I'd be glad to help push you in your wheelchair, Mrs. Ramos."

Rosa Ramos's eyes sparkled in Missy's direction, and she glanced to either side at her grandchildren before she said, "It sounds like very much fun."

"But Abuela," Lucas said, "We aren't supposed to..."

"It's about time you kids lived a little," Rosa said. "I remember how special a day on the town felt when I was young." She looked up at Arnie with a confident

smile. “We accept your... What’s the word? Invitation.  
What time shall we be ready?”



## CHAPTER 22

### **ROSA RAMOS**

A spirited game of Monopoly, storm-watching through the glass, and hot chocolate in deference to the wind and rain filled the time that evening. One or another of them mused about how easy it had been to convince Mrs. Ramos to accept their invitation. Without much argument from Lucas, either.

“Maybe Mrs. Ramos *is* still in charge,” Beth said, “and I just picked up on the wrong clues and thought the children were dictating the rules.”

“I think Lucas really wants to kick around a soccer ball with us,” Wyatt said.

“Mrs. Ramos is nice,” Missy stated with authority. “She smiled at me when I said I’d push her wheelchair.”

“I’m proud of you kids wanting to share your day with people who need to have fun,” Arnie said. “I hope our outing will live up to Mrs. Ramos’s expectations of ‘a day on the town.’”

“Maybe Mrs. Ramos wants to hear more of your compliments.” Beth winked. The kids looked as if they knew she’d made a joke but weren’t quite sure if they should laugh.

After Janae dropped Alana off at the condo at nine the next morning, an hour and a half remained before time to meet the neighbors. Psycho Cat rubbed back and forth against Alana's legs and then went to the door. His loud "meow" was an unmistakable demand for attention.

"Okay, okay, I hear you," Beth said with a laugh. "Do any of you want to take a short walk with Sylvester and me?"

"I thought Alana could help me pick out what I'm going to wear today." Missy looked at her cousin. "I mean, if you want to."

"Okay," Alana said. "We might not have time to walk Sylvester with you, Grandma."

"I'm good," Arnie said.

"How about you, Wyatt? Ya want to do a little speed-walking with your old grandma and her psycho cat?" Beth asked.

Wyatt followed the chattering girls into the bedroom with his eyes, watched Arnie finishing the breakfast clean-up, and glanced at his electronic tablet.

Beth jogged in place. "Oh, well, I changed my mind, you'd better stay here. You might not be able to keep up with me."

Wyatt grinned. "You're on. I'll get my running shoes."

Beth decided this couldn't have worked out better if she'd planned it. She hadn't made much effort to spend time alone with Wyatt all week. This would give them a chance to do something together before Arnie grabbed him off to do the soccer thing, and she could get a little exercise at the same time. Beth knew Wyatt could walk much faster than she could, but maybe he would slow to her pace while they walked the cat so they could chat.

Wyatt held Psycho Cat's leash in front of the building on the way to the trail. "This is pretty much like walking a dog," he said. "Except instead of

stopping every few feet to pee, Sylvester wanders off the path to chase insects.”

“He’ll trot along with us for a short distance when we start our power walk on the trail,” Beth said.

She demonstrated the power walk, one foot always on the ground, arms pumping. “I can’t pump my arms too well, though, when I’m holding the leash in one hand or when I’m pushing this guy in this.” She indicated the stroller she carried on her back like a backpack. “But, hey, I need some kind of excuse for walking slower than you.”

Sure enough, when they reached the trail and headed south, Psycho Cat loped ahead of Wyatt at a pace he’d mastered after walking with Beth so many times. Wyatt gave Beth a surprised look and then watched her power walk technique again before he tried it.

“You’re a natural,” Beth cheered as Wyatt and Psycho Cat sped ahead of her. Intent on looking at her grandson and her cat, she missed seeing a puddle created by the storm of the previous evening. She splashed into it at a fast pace before she realized she needed to jump to the side. In doing so, Beth fell to her knees into the mud.

Wyatt and Psycho Cat had trekked half a block ahead when Wyatt looked back and saw his grandmother wiping her shoes on some grass alongside the track. He pulled back on the cat’s leash, but Psycho Cat refused to turn around. Instead, he lay in the middle of the track with his chin on his paws as if he’d found a new place to take a nap. Wyatt yanked again, but the cat refused to budge.

“Come on, Sylvester,” Wyatt pleaded, “we need to go back and help Grandma.”

Beth watched the cat hunker down further to become a dead weight and Wyatt stand holding the leash down by his side with a disgusted look on his face as she continued toward them. “Sorry, Wyatt, I

should have warned you. Sylvester is a one-way-walker cat. He's never learned to turn around and go back. I always put him in his buggy before we turn." She shrugged the stroller off her shoulders and opened it.

"What happened to you?" Wyatt asked, looking at her mud-covered lower legs.

"I was more interested in you and the cat than in where I was going. Guess we'll have to get back home in time for me to take a quick shower before we pick up Lucas and his family, huh?"

They hiked on with Beth pushing the stroller and Wyatt walking beside her. Maybe he had slowed down to be there to save Beth if she started to fall into a hole again, but Beth didn't care. She enjoyed asking him about his school activities and friends at home while they walked. Psycho Cat rode placidly with what Beth was sure was a satisfied cat smile on his face.

"Is that Fabienne with her mother?" Wyatt pointed ahead after they'd walked another half mile.

"It is." Hélène waved and then bent forward over the stroller as if telling Fabienne to look forward.

After Fabienne almost fell out of her stroller to pet Psycho Cat in his smaller one, Beth asked, "Did you get the job at Café Provence that you interviewed for yesterday?"

"I believe I might be hired, but I found out the job doesn't start until the end of September. I have another interview tomorrow at Aixois. Have you heard of it?"

"Yes, the wonderful French restaurant a few blocks north of Brookside—closer than Café Provence, for sure. How'd you find out it has an opening?"

Hélène cut her eyes toward Fabienne for a moment, and her cheeks grew pink. "I have...contacts in the restaurant business."

"Oh, that's right. Viktor, of course, and Alexei. I saw Alexei at the building recently." Beth felt as if she were

probing, but she needed to know if she had been helping a person who was scheming to frame her own husband for murder.

Hélène straightened her shoulders and took a breath before answering. “I know I told you I didn’t trust Alexei, but he’s been helping me. He watched Fabienne when I interviewed at Café Provence, and he told me about the opening at Aixois. I thought he took our money under false pretenses, but he says the money is going to help Viktor’s family with basic living expenses as well as with their cause.”

Beth nodded, not in agreement, but to show she understood. “Well, I doubt Alexei will be able to stay with Fabienne all the time if you get the job. Let me know if you need my help asking around for babysitters.”

“Thank you, but I’ve contacted my sister, and she’s excited to come. Our mother is a little sad that both of us will be so far away, but she wants us to have opportunities. Both of my brothers have jobs near home, and they visit often.”

“It’s hard for a mother to have her daughters so far away. I should know.”

After Hélène and Fabienne were out of earshot, Wyatt asked, “Has Lucas met Fabienne’s mother?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Beth said with mild interest while thinking about Alexei and Hélène’s relationship. “Why do you ask?”

“Lucas told me that a man with a Russian-sounding accent who was taking money from his grandfather was arrested for his murder. Isn’t that Fabienne’s father?”

“I’m afraid it is.”

“I don’t think Lucas knows Fabienne is the arrested guy’s little girl.”

“I don’t think so, either.”

“I hope he isn’t guilty, because then Fabienne wouldn’t have a dad, and her mom wouldn’t have a husband.”

“They’d still have a father and husband, but he wouldn’t be with them anymore for many years, maybe never. The thing is I don’t think Viktor Lutsenko pushed Mr. Ramos, even though the evidence points to him. I think someone framed him.”

“Who?”

“I’m not sure, but if Lucas tells you any more about the day his grandfather died, will you tell me? Maybe something he says will be important.”

“He might not want to talk about that.” Wyatt looked at his grandmother with a worried frown on his face.

“I don’t mean for you to question him about it. Today, we just want to show Lucas’s family they can have a good time outside of their condo. Okay?” Beth smiled at Wyatt.

He looked relieved. “Okay.”

Beth looked at her watch. “Speaking of which—it’s time we turn around and head back.”

Lucas and Lucia were standing on either side of Rosa’s wheelchair in front of the elevator doors when Beth and her family showed up. Beth felt underdressed in her walking shorts and knit top with the young girls all in frilly sundresses. Missy and Alana wore new clothes they bought at Prairie Village, and Lucia’s dress was a variation of the one she wore to dinner two nights ago. Maybe her grandmother made it. Rosa wore white summer slacks and a tailored black and white top that complimented her perfect salt and pepper bun. Her elegant red-beaded earrings and necklace may have been of her own design. At least, Arnie and the boys wore casual sports clothes.

All the way to the sidewalk, Lucas pushed his grandmother's wheelchair and answered for her when Beth or Arnie asked a question. Lucia walked by the side of the chair but sometimes fell back with the girls as they prattled on about clothes and school.

Halfway to the end of the block, Missy strode to Rosa's side and asked, "Mrs. Ramos, may I push your chair for a little while?"

Before Rosa had a chance to respond, Lucas said, "No, thank you. I'm pushing her."

Missy glanced at Lucas and then back at Rosa and spoke in her most polite tone. "I'd like to take a turn, Mrs. Ramos. May I?"

"I am..." Lucas began.

Rosa interrupted him. "I want the little girl to push me."

She gave Missy a big smile, and Missy returned it. Then, Missy gave Lucas the look she might have given her big brother in the same situation—a self-satisfied look that said, "I won. Hand it over." Lucas did so with a scowl, but then he took up a position close to one side of the wheelchair as Missy pushed.

Wyatt took the opportunity to leave Arnie's side, walked up beside Lucas, and pointed out the park where he planned for them to take the soccer ball. At first, Lucas kept an eye on his grandmother even as he interacted with Wyatt. But when the two got into a heated discussion about soccer teams, soccer players, and how they could practice soccer with only three guys, Lucas relaxed enough to walk ahead of the chair so Wyatt would have room to share the sidewalk with him.

After they all waited for traffic and crossed Meyer Boulevard, Arnie joined the boys, and the girls also strode out ahead of Missy and the wheelchair. Beth slowed down to make sure Missy got over the curbs and stayed with them while the others walked on.

“Are you getting tired of pushing?” Beth asked Missy.

“Not yet.”

“Are you doing okay out on this bumpy sidewalk, Rosa?”

“This is nice ride. I can look around. Sometimes, when Lucas and Lucia were younger, we walked to the market while Eduardo was at work—when I did not sit in chair. Modern store is not like the markets in my hometown in Peru.”

“Are you from a village?”

“Cusco is a city in the mountains. Long ago, it was the capital of the Inca Empire. The market where my family shopped fills a whole block. We could buy fresh meat and produce, baked bread and sweets, all kinds of clothing, leather goods, woven materials, hats... And, oh, the chocolate we got there when we had extra money!”

Missy leaned forward as she pushed. “I saw a show about llamas that live in Peru. Did you have a llama?”

Rosa giggled. “No. Not in the city. But my Indian cousins down the mountain had llamas and guinea pigs. When we visit, I could pet and play with them.” She looked back at Missy with a mischievous grin. “Then, we ate the guinea pigs, called *cuy*, for supper.”

“Oh, you didn’t.” Missy scoffed.

“We all eat *cuy* in Peru. It’s our pork.”

“I’m ready for you to push Mrs. Ramos now, Grandma.” Missy ran to catch up with Alana and Lucia yelling, “Guess what they eat in Peru!”

“This city and our customs must have seemed strange to you when you first came,” Beth said as she took over pushing the smooth-rolling wheelchair. “Does this Brookside area remind you of neighborhoods in Cusco?”

“Oh, no. My parents’ house is adobe, and the great buildings of the city are in the ornate, Baroque Spanish style.”

“Did you meet your husband there?”

When Rosa turned to look at Beth, her eyes had a far-away look. “Eduardo, si. He go to university in Cusco, and we meet when his father require him to hire our agency to find a missing relative.”

“What kind of agency?”

“I work in a private investigation firm. They taught me all the tricks, but mostly I looked for records and took surveillance photos. Eduardo talked me into letting him come with me while I tracked down his cousin, and we found out how he was robbing the family. Eduardo fell in love with me, but his family did not approve.”

“But why?” Beth asked.

“Ah, because I am Mestizo—part white, part indigenous. Eduardo’s bloodline is pure Spanish, and his family wanted him to marry a white person. But Eduardo is also stubborn. He marry *me* and take me to his hometown, Tacna, after he graduate.”

“Where is Tacna?”

“In the south, near Chile.”

“So, is that how your daughter met Lucas and Lucia’s father?”

Rosa didn’t respond. Beth pushed her in silence until they reached their first destination, the New Dime Store.



## CHAPTER 23

### **INSURANCE**

It took longer than Wyatt and Arnie had expected to finish shopping. On every isle, Lucas found something to handle and inspect, and he wanted to look through the entire New Dime Store before Arnie paid for a soccer ball he and Wyatt considered more a toy than regulation sporting equipment.

Lucia and Rosa, too, seemed to enjoy the variety of products they could actually handle. Lucia told Beth and Alana that, with the exception of phoned-in food orders, they did all of their shopping online. Rosa found some beads, and Alana picked up a roll of ribbon that she handed to her grandmother. At the check-out counter, Beth watched as Lucia found a credit card in Rosa's purse. She handed it to the clerk who gave it back and told her how to swipe it.

"Lucas enjoyed the store as much as his sister did," Beth whispered to Arnie as they all trooped through the door. "Why don't we take him to Brookside Toy and Science before you go to the park?"

"You're right." Arnie spoke softly and wiggled his index finger toward Wyatt to join them. "I'm getting a big kick out of watching those kids' faces. This may be as good to them as a museum tour. What do you

think, Wyatt? Should we take Lucas and Lucia to the science toy store next door before we go sweat in the park?”

“Yeah, good idea,” Wyatt said. He walked over to the kids and Rosa who were waiting in a group on the sidewalk. “This way, guys. The next store has some cool stuff.”

After looking at almost everything and staring wide-eyed at the rockets, dinosaurs, and volcanoes that hung from the ceiling and lined the top shelves, Lucas found an expensive science kit that included physical science experiments related to the unit he and Lucia were studying. He told Lucia to get the credit card again to pay for it. Beth, who somehow had inherited the responsibility of pushing Rosa’s wheelchair through the stores, observed Rosa as the kids made the decisions and prepared to pay. Their grandmother looked a little confused but compliant as Lucia dug through her purse and, directed by the store clerk, Lucas handed the card swipe machine down for his grandmother’s signature.

Outside the store, they all put their packages in a shopping bag hung on the back of the wheelchair, and Arnie and the boys took their ball and headed to the park. Beth and her cheerful group headed on to the next shop, World’s Window, with Lucia now pushing Rosa.

“Sorry, girls,” Beth said, “this store doesn’t have girls’ clothing, only women’s. It has jewelry and artwork made in Kansas City and around the world, though. You might enjoy looking for a few minutes.”

“Jewelry and art, Abuela,” Lucia said, maneuvering her through the double doors while Alana and Missy held them open, “like you make.”

Rosa fingered her necklace as she gazed around. Lucia, her eyes wide, wheeled her from one display to another while Beth, Alana, and Missy gathered round to point out their favorite pieces. Lucia’s gigantic smile

matched the one on her grandmother's face. Two shop clerks asked if they could help and then stood close to watch as Lucia and Rosa put their heads together and gasped at item after item.

Lucia convinced her grandmother to purchase a printed top after two clucking clerks, three young girls, and Beth helped her into a small dressing room, helped her change from the blouse she was wearing, and helped her stand at the mirror to admire the asymmetrical design of the silk and cotton creation. Again, Lucia performed the check-out operation.

Beth looked at her watch as they left the shop. "We have only fifteen minutes left before time to meet the boys for lunch. There're two more stores on this block that sell arts and crafts, but we'll have only five minutes to spend in each one."

"Abuela sells her jewelry and collages in a place called Corinth Antique Mall. I've seen its website, but I've never been there," Lucia said. "I don't know how we'll be able to take her artwork there to be sold, now. My grandfather used to do that."

"Can we walk there?" Missy asked.

"It's a long way," Beth said. "We can't walk, but I can probably drive you and your grandmother there sometime, Lucia. I'm glad you bought more beads today so you can make more jewelry, Rosa."

When she heard her name, Rosa looked around at Beth. "I bought more beads?"

"Remember, you bought some in that first store," Lucia said.

"The New Dime Store, remember, Mrs. Ramos?" Alana pulled the little bag of beads out of the wheelchair's pocket, pulled out a few, and held them out to Rosa whose expression looked completely blank as if she'd never seen them before.

"These are pretty," she said.

"My grandmother, um, forgets sometimes. When she's, ah, had a busy day like today." Lucia stuttered

to explain, and a blush crept onto her cheeks. “Don’t you, Abuela?”

“Sometimes,” Rosa muttered, unconcerned.

The round, wooden, corner table by the front windows at Bella Napoli provided seating for eight when they pulled up an extra chair. They all squeezed close together so there was space for the wheelchair, too. Beth decided the guys would appreciate a cool place even though she would have preferred to eat outdoors. Arnie and the boys verified her prediction when they arrived a few minutes later with wet shirt backs and red faces.

At least, they could watch the parade of people, some with adorable dogs lying beside their chairs, who sat under umbrellas and shade trees at the outdoor tables. Two water bowls, refilled by the staff, sat beneath a tree near the street. The casual outdoor seating was a magnet for business people as well as for families, retired folks, and anyone wanting a cool drink and a spicy Italian delicacy while walking a pet. Inside, the Italian market and deli counter provided enough charm to make up for the lack of canine companionship.

Wyatt, engaged today with the family and friends rather than with his ubiquitous I-Pad, appeared energized as he related how fast Lucas caught on after he and his grandfather demonstrated basic soccer techniques. “Lucas can even do a header,” Wyatt said. “It took me a long time to learn how to do it right.”

Lucas beamed. His happy, slightly smug demeanor reminded Beth of her kids’ and grandchildren’s faces, looks of wonder, and sense of power when they were toddlers experiencing their first successes at throwing and catching balls or swinging bats and rackets. Arnie’s thoughts must have been along the same lines, because he studied Lucas with a smile on his face while Wyatt described plays and misplays.

“One of Grandpa’s headers went over the fence onto one of the tennis courts,” Wyatt said.

“Yeah, the tennis players thought I’d lost my head.” Arnie chuckled.

“Ho, ho,” Beth said.

There was a short silence, and then the girls giggled. “That’s funny, Grandpa,” Missy said.

“I played against Grandpa and Lucas,” Wyatt boasted.

“And he made the most goals,” Arnie said.

“Well, Wyatt’s been playing soccer since he was five years old,” Missy said, “Lucas just started, and Grandpa is...kinda...you know. He’s a grandpa.”

“Are you saying I’m old and slow?” Arnie said and gave Missy a mock-stricken look. “Don’t even think it. I bet I can beat you in a pasta-eating contest.”

“Oh, no,” Beth said. “It’s too hot to have an eating contest. Besides, I happen to know your grandpa is great at golf and baseball. He hasn’t had a lot of practice playing soccer.”

“Hear that endorsement, fellows? It always helps to have a good woman on your side,” Arnie said.

“I’m on your side, too,” Missy said.

“Two good women. That’s even better.” Arnie winked at Missy.

“Three,” Alana said.

“Four,” Lucia said with a grin at Wyatt and then seemed to grow a great interest in refolding the napkin on her lap after Wyatt smiled back at her for a few seconds longer than necessary.

If Rosa thought about adding her vote to the list, they never knew, because two waiters appeared with the food orders, and bright colors and spicy Italian aromas became their focus. The girls shared a large Margherita pizza. Beth ate a spinach salad. The boys opted for meatball grinders with sides of spaghetti, and Arnie had lasagna. With obvious relish, Rosa dug into a huge plate of Scoglio, a pasta dish made with

mussels, clams, shrimp, octopus, tomato sauce, and pepper flakes.

While they had all looked at their menus, Lucas had whispered to Lucia and Rosa that they should look at the prices before they ordered. Quick to understand the boy's concern, Arnie told Rosa that the meal would be on him and that they should all order whatever they wanted.

After they ate their fill and the check came, Lucas looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry my grandmother ordered a seventeen-dollar item, Mr. Stockwell," he said quietly to Arnie while Beth was talking to Rosa and the girls about Rosa's art. "My abuela isn't used to paying attention to prices. When my grandfather was alive, we could order whatever we wanted when we had food delivered."

"Don't worry about it," Arnie said. "I'm glad she ordered something she could enjoy, and now she's taking half of it home for another time."

"Yes. Grandmother grew up in Peru and learned not to be wasteful. But..." Lucas looked into the distance. "...now we have to be very careful so the savings will last until I am old enough to get a job." He bit his lip and looked away as if trying not to cry. "No new money is coming into the bank account that we use to pay bills."

"Your grandfather took his retirement pension as a lump sum?" Arnie asked.

Lucas lowered his head as if he either didn't understand or didn't want to talk about it. Rosa reached her hand out toward him, perhaps to comfort the boy, but Lucia took her grandmother's hand and held it.

"Wyatt, Alana, Missy—why don't you look at all the Italian foods on the shelves and in the deli case?" Beth asked with forced cheerfulness. "You can choose something for me to buy for breakfast or for a snack later on, if you find something that looks good."

“I just want ice-cream,” Missy said.

“Come on, Missy,” Wyatt said with a look that told Missy she needed to leave the table. “We’ll look for the snack for Grandma and get ice-cream later.”

“Don’t be sad, Lucas,” Missy said looking back as she stood to follow her brother and cousin.

Arnie frowned as if trying to figure a solution. “Lucas, did your grandfather have a life insurance policy?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Mrs. Ramos,” Arnie said turning toward Rosa who was seated on the other side of the table, “did your husband have a life insurance policy you can now collect to help with your expenses?”

Rosa gazed at him. “Eduardo takes care of insurance and investments.”

“Do you know where he keeps his records and files, dear?” Beth asked, suddenly more concerned than ever about how on earth this lady could take care of herself and two children.

When Rosa frowned, as if in concentration, Lucia spoke up. “We haven’t looked through the files in my abuelo’s office yet. Maybe we’d find the insurance there?”

Beth addressed the twins. “If your grandfather had life insurance, the money from it will maybe help you find out more about your family back in Peru, take good care of your grandmother, and let you go to college one day. Mr. Stockwell works in insurance. Will you let him help you look for a policy and apply for the money if there is some coming to you?”

Lucia nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Stockwell and Mr. Stockwell.”

But Lucas wiped an eye and said. “This is my responsibility. I’ll look for it.”

“You seem to be doing a great job of looking out for your sister and your grandmother, Lucas,” Arnie said, “but part of being responsible is letting experts help

when there're things you don't understand. Your grandfather may have put some of his important papers into a safety deposit box at a bank or in a safe hidden away in your condo. You need to know where to look."

Lucas's expression showed conflicting emotions. Beth thought he must be so ingrained with his grandfather's warnings about privacy that agreeing to accept Arnie's help was difficult at best.

Lucia watched her brother for a short time with a slight frown on her face, and then she turned toward Arnie. "If you find the insurance...um..."

"Policy," Beth said.

"If you find an insurance policy, did you say it will help us find out about our father?"

Arnie gave Beth a disgusted look that made her straighten her shoulders and think about what she had told the children. "We're not sure there is a policy, but if there is, money from an insurance claim will help you pay the bills and still have some left over to hire help from someone, a lawyer or a private investigator, who can look for your father or another relative. Your grandmother might remember an agent we can contact in Peru who can help. That's what I meant."

Lucas nodded as if he at last understood. "Thank you, Mr. Stockwell. I accept your invitation to look through my grandfather's files."

"Is that okay with you?" Arnie asked Rosa.

Rosa looked up, clear-eyed and serious, from the doggie bag box she'd been turning in a slow circle on the table. "It is very kind of you. Yes, please help us look for a life insurance policy and show us how to claim the money if we find one. If we have money, we can go home."

They all stared at her in surprise for a few moments.

Beth felt relieved that this might be a step toward finding a way to make sure these children were cared for. Now, to find out about the children's father *and* to get Mr. Ramos's death cleared up. If they found a life insurance policy, it might not make a difference how Mr. Ramos died as far as settling a claim. Ah, but a murder trial for Viktor Lutsenko might require Rosa to stay in town to be a witness. There were so many factors that threatened the twins' futures.

The more Beth learned about Rosa and the twins, the less she wanted to call Detective Rinquire or Child Services for advice. If she told them about Rosa, the authorities might have to put Lucas and Lucia in foster care or deport them to an orphanage in Peru. Besides, every time she thought Rosa had become too senile to cope, the woman showed a lucid side like the one they'd just heard. Beth crossed her fingers under the table in the hope she could help the twins find their father or some other relative who could care for them and their grandmother. Rosa Ramos could be their best source of information if her memory worked well at least some of the time.



## CHAPTER 24

### **ALEXEI**

On the way back to the condo building, after the children ate their ice-cream cones, Beth suggested that while Arnie helped Rosa and Lucas look through files, she could take the other kids to the pool. She waited for immediate agreement, but no one jumped at the idea, and Lucas looked dejected. Well, how silly of her. Of course Wyatt and Lucia would want Lucas at the pool. Lucia might want to be in on the insurance policy search, too. Alana didn't cheer at her suggestion. Only Missy skipped ahead with a smile on her face.

Beth, by default having become the wheelchair pusher, tried again. "Here's another idea. Maybe Mrs. Ramos will explain her artwork to the rest of us and tell us how she'll use her new beads while Arnie and the twins tackle the file cabinet, unless you want to help with the search for the insurance policy, Rosa. We can go down to the pool when we finish."

Rosa turned around to look at her with a pinch in her face that looked like fear. "I am not allowed to touch the files. Eduardo will use his belt."

Lucia rushed to her grandmother's side. "No, no. Not anymore, Abuela. Abuelo can't hurt you now."

Beth was abashed, but she forced her voice to sound light. “You don’t have to look at the files, Rosa. Would you like to show us your artwork? We saw the table where you work, but we’d love to hear you explain it.”

“I will show you how I design my creations,” Rosa said.

Alana, Missy, and Lucia reached the front doors of the condo building ahead of the rest of them and waved toward Al at the front desk. Since there was no ramp, Arnie walked up from where he’d been chatting with the boys to take the chair from Beth so he could tip the wheels and roll them up the three wide steps.

Beth stepped to the side, looked into the building and saw Al approach to hold open one of the wide glass doors. The three girls filed in, each with a smile and “thank you” to Al, and Lucia held the inner door open as Arnie manipulated the wheelchair into the lobby.

“Quite a group you’ve got today, Mrs. Stockwell,” Al said as Beth stepped into the vestibule behind Arnie and peered back to make sure Wyatt and Lucas were coming. “Herding kids today instead of cats, I see.”

“You have me figured out, Al,” Beth said. “I’m part border collie.”

From her position between the sets of doors, Beth glanced into the lobby where Arnie looked rather uncomfortable with his hands on the wheelchair handles, and the girls waited close by. At that moment, she saw Alexei step off the elevator. The man took four or five steps toward the front doors, stopped in his tracks, and watched for a long second. When Lucas and Wyatt arrived at the entrance, he pivoted one-hundred-eighty degrees and rushed to the rear exit.

Beth blinked. Had she just seen what she saw? She opened her mouth to ask Al about Alexei again, but she couldn’t think what to ask. He had already told

her, with no suspicion or surprise, that Alexei visited nearly every day. Even though H el ene seemed embarrassed and evasive, she had a believable explanation. Why, then, did Alexei’s avoidance of them look so furtive? Wasn’t he the logical suspect for Mr. Ramos’s murder? Was H el ene dedicated to proving her husband’s innocence, or not?

There was no time to look into those doubts today, though. The question of life insurance was the big issue. On the way up in the elevator, Lucas told his grandmother they might soon have a way to take her home to Peru.

Beth became concerned that they wouldn’t find a policy. “Don’t count your chickens...” she told the kids.

Everyone but Arnie gave her a blank stare.

“Don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched,” Arnie said. “It means you can’t start planning how you’ll use the money until we find out if there is a life insurance policy. Even if there is, it might take some time to claim the benefit.”

As the nine of them exited the elevator on the tenth floor, Lucas looked up at Arnie. “Will you help us look for insurance now, Mr. Stockwell?”

“Sure,” Arnie said. “Is it okay with you for me to push you into your condo and then go look at the files with your grandchildren, Rosa?”

She nodded. “My husband believes in insurance.”

Lucas reached into his pocket for the remote he used to unlock the penthouse door. It was little surprise to Beth that he controlled the access, but as she watched the boy open the door, she wondered how Rosa felt about it. She glanced at the woman but saw no expression on her face.

“Let me pull our packages out of the bag here,” Beth said as she reached into the pocket on the back of the wheelchair. “We’ll take these to our condo, give Sylvester fresh food and water, and be back in a jiffy to look at your art, Rosa. Is that okay with you kids?”

The two girls agreed with smiles, but Wyatt looked glum. "I might stay there to play a video game," he said.

"Come to think of it, we might need another set of eyes," Arnie said. "If we don't come up with a policy in a folder labelled 'insurance' right away, we may have to divide up and search through related files. Lucas and Lucia, don't you think Wyatt should come along to help with the search?"

Beth watched. The twins looked at one another. They were still kids, after all, and not used to adults asking their opinions about important matters. Even though Lucas acted tough and in control, Wyatt was a year older, and Arnie was his elder. Today, the twins' lifelong habit of hiding from the outside world seemed to be fading. Lucia raised her eyebrows to Lucas, and they nodded to each other. Then, they turned back to Arnie and assented, their eyes expressing relief at having an adult to rely on.

"We'll show you where Abuelo kept his papers," Lucia said. "This way." Arnie and Wyatt followed leaving Rosa just inside the door in her wheelchair and Beth with the girls standing outside the door.

"You can come with us," Missy said to Rosa, "and meet Grandma's big kitty." She turned to Beth. "Can she, Grandma?"

Beth smiled at Missy and then at Rosa. "Of course. You met my cat, Sylvester, once before when my sister, Meg, and her grandson, Todd, were with me. Do you remember?"

Rosa's eyes lit up. "Yellow cat. Si. He sit on my lap."

"Do you want to visit him?" Beth asked.

"Si. Yes. This is good time to see *el gato bonito*."

When Beth unlocked the door and pushed Rosa into her condo, Psycho Cat was nowhere in sight. Beth laid her packages aside and went to the kitchen to refill the cat's food and water bowls, and the girls searched behind the furniture and in all the bedrooms.

They called “Sylvester” and had Rosa wheeling herself around the room also calling his name—except hers sounded like she was calling a marine mammal to shore, “Come, Seal-vester.”

Beth walked over near the bedroom hallway door. “Hold it, everybody,” she said. “Sometimes he’ll come out of hiding when I whistle.”

No one spoke for several moments after Beth twice blew out her best “come-and-get-it” whistle. But during that short period of quiet, she heard a soft noise from the room at the end of the hall, the guest room. “I think I might have found him,” she said and led the way as she followed the tiny cat meows to the closet in the room Missy was using.

Sure enough, when Beth opened the closet door, Psycho Cat leaped out. Beth, of course, stood right in the doorway, and the force of the big cat’s lunge landed on her right leg. She pulled it back and hit the side of the laundry basket in which Missy was storing her dirty clothes to be washed before the plane trip to Oregon the next day. With her left foot in the air ready to take another step backwards, Beth lost her balance and fell backward into the soft pile of garments.

With her seat planted firmly in the middle, her knees bent over one edge, and her head resting against the other end of the basket, Beth lowered her chin and assessed her condition. No apparent trauma.

Missy stood watching her with wide eyes, Psycho Cat scooted under the bed, and Rosa wheeled into the room and stopped, her face a large question mark.

Alana rushed to help her up. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Just taking a short nap,” Beth quipped. The silence told her what she already knew—her dry humor didn’t always hit the mark with the youngsters. “Yes, I’m fine. It always amazes me how powerful that cat is.” She lifted her hands for Alana to help tug her to a standing position.

Rosa was the first to chuckle. The reaction caught Beth by surprise, but then she couldn't help joining in. The girls looked at them both as if they had lost their senses, but it took only a moment for them all to be chortling. Missy sobered first and got down on her stomach to coax Psycho Cat out from under the bed. The rest of them watched.

"Come on out, Sylvester. Grandma isn't hurt, and there's a new friend here to see you."

Alana bent over to squint into the darkness. "I'm sorry we shut the door on you after we got Missy's clothes out of the closet, Sylvester. We didn't know you snuck in there."

It took a few minutes, but Psycho Cat finally ducked out, sat on his haunches beside the bed in a dignified manner, and licked his fur as if disdainful of this bunch of humans being giggle-prone in spite of his devastating experience. The regal cat behavior caused Rosa to chuckle again.

She wheeled her chair as far into the room as the dresser and lamp table would allow and reached a hand toward Psycho Cat. "*Gato*, we don't laugh at you," she said.

Psycho Cat peered at her with his big green eyes and then sauntered to the chair and pawed at the wheel with a tiny rumble in his throat, as he'd done when Meg released his leash and let him run into the penthouse. And, as before, he jumped into Rosa's lap, nosed her chin, and curled into a ball with a loud purr while she stroked his fur.

Alana stood watching with her mouth open, a look of sudden understanding on her face. Beth frowned and started to ask what Alana was thinking, but decided to ask later. Missy edged close to the side of the wheelchair and rubbed the cat's head. "He likes to have his head rubbed, Mrs. Ramos. Sylvester likes you. My mama says animals can tell when you like them and will be friendly."

The cat stayed on Rosa's lap until Beth turned the chair toward the hallway. Psycho Cat jumped down and went toward his litter box in the laundry room. When asked, Rosa admitted to having never stepped inside this condo although she'd lived across the hall for fourteen years. So Beth led her into each of the bedrooms and then back into the large combo living room/dining room with the kitchen divided off by its bar-style counter. The space was less than half as large as the penthouse, and yet Rosa admired everything and told Beth how bright and pretty it looked. By the time the tour was finished, Psycho Cat had nibbled at his bowl of kibbles, licked up a little water, and appeared at the front of Rosa's chair.

"Are you ready to go back home and show us your artwork?" Beth asked.

Rosa took her feet off the footrests in order to bend forward and pet the cat. "My artwork? Yes, I'll show you my art. It's in my studio."

Alana looked at Beth with raised eyebrows, but Missy went to the back of the wheelchair and grabbed the handles. "Put your feet up and hands in, and I'll push. I think Sylvester wants to go with us. Can he, Grandma?"

"Sure. I'll get his harness and leash."

But as soon as Rosa stopped stroking him and put her arms inside the armrests and her feet back on the footrests, Psycho Cat jumped onto her lap again. "Sylvester can ride with me," Rosa said with a smile as the cat cozied into a ball.



## CHAPTER 25

### **COLLAGES AND MOSAICS**

Alana rang the doorbell at the penthouse after Beth discovered that Rosa had neither a remote nor knowledge of the keypad code to unlock the door. Lucia opened up for them only after peering through the eyepiece to make sure who was there.

“Oh, good, you brought the kitty.” Lucia looked as excited as Rosa to have the cat visit her home and reached out tentatively to pet his head. “I’ll get him a bowl of water or something.”

“He just ate and drank at home,” Beth said. “Besides, I don’t think we’re going to get him off your grandmother’s lap. He looks quite content.”

“You love animals, don’t you Abuela?” Lucia said.

“How’s the insurance policy search going?” Beth asked.

There are four file cabinets we have to search. Lucas knew the password for Abuelo’s computer, and Mr. Stockwell is looking there. I searched under I for insurance and L for life insurance but didn’t find anything in one of the file cabinets. But Mr. Stockwell told us to look through the rest of the file holders to see if it could be under the name of the insurance company. Lucas and Wyatt are searching, too.”

“Well, if it’s there, one of you will find it,” Beth said. “Tell Mr. Stockwell to let us know if he needs more help.”

Lucia walked with them to Rosa’s work table and then scurried back to her grandfather’s office. Beth took the remaining packages out of the storage bag on the back of the wheelchair—Rosa’s beads and ribbon, her new blouse, and the scientific toys purchased by the kids. She laid them all on the coffee table in front of the T.V. so the kids would find them—except for the beads, which she took to Rosa.

Alana and Missy became engrossed in examining jewelry, some whimsical and some elegant, arranged in trays on one side of the long, dark-metal table. The “work table” had earned its name. By the looks of the burn marks, scratches, and stains, it had suffered its share of soldering, cutting, and dying jobs. The girls didn’t seem to notice the table, though. Exclamations of “I like this one,” “This necklace is pretty,” and “My mom has pearl earrings, but they aren’t this big” caused Beth to smile and nod. The girls’ enthusiasm was reflected on Rosa’s face as she rolled up to the table to tell them about each stone, bead, and metal.

Psycho Cat, on Rosa’s lap under the edge of the table, stuck his head out between the table top and the arm she was stretching toward her creations. Beth noticed his alert ears and wide eyes, but since he seemed content to sit and watch, she turned her attention to Rosa’s explanations of how she had designed and crafted different pieces.

“How will you use these beads you bought today?” Beth asked as she held out the packages of colorful beads from the New Dime Store.

Rosa took them from Beth’s hand and laid the six packages out in front of her on the table. “I think these small marbled beads will become earrings. Perhaps on these sterling fishhook wires.” She slid a pattern of beads onto a wire and held it up. “You like?”

“It’s gorgeous,” Alana said.

“The other sizes I can string into necklaces and bracelets. They will match or compliment the earrings. Like this.” Rosa strung a selection of sizes and colors onto a silver wire, the largest bead in the middle, and held it around her neck.

“That is really, really, really pretty, Mrs. Ramos,” Missy gushed.

“For young girls I make more simple jewelry. You pick favorite bead to match pretty sundress.”

Alana picked an asymmetrical variegated blue bead with shades that matched her eyes and the trim on her dress. Rosa chose a delicate silver chain from a collection in a bin at the back of the table, threaded the bead onto it with two burnished silver beads on each side, and used a thin, needle-nosed tool to attach a clasp to the ends of the chain. She held it up for Alana’s approval and gave it to Beth to put around Alana’s neck.

“Thank you, Mrs. Ramos. It’s beautiful,” Alana said.

Missy danced around her cousin, admiring the new necklace, her face glowing with excitement. When Rosa backed away from the table and caressed Psycho Cat’s head and ears, Beth panicked. What would she do for Missy if Rosa didn’t give her a necklace? Her heart hurt, and tears came to her eyes as she saw Missy’s face crumple.

In less than a minute, Rosa patted the cat, rolled back to the table, and addressed Missy. “Now, little girl, you pick a large bead or maybe three smaller beads. Your dress is red and white, and there are beads that will match or contrast.”

Missy’s expression changed faster than a magician hides a coin. Her dimples in full bloom, she chose three shiny beads, and Rosa strung them on a gold chain. Beth, feeling light-hearted but ashamed at having mistrusted Rosa, fastened the finished necklace around Missy’s neck. The lady changed into an

intelligent, creative individual when working on her artwork. She hadn't remembered the girl's names, but she created a piece for each that was ideal for her coloring, size, and age. The girls fingered their beads and bent their heads to admire them again and again.

While Rosa worked on the second necklace, Psycho Cat had scooted off Rosa's lap and moseyed around the large room. Beth kept track of him enough to make sure he didn't mess with the computers or knock something off the table tops, but he seemed to just be sniffing out the unfamiliar surroundings. After Missy cheered up, Beth's attention turned to Rosa's other works of art.

There were mosaics and collages of all sizes mounted and standing on shelving above the work table as well as hanging on the walls in the room. Some of the colorful mosaic designs were made with pieces of glass and china, some with odd-sized tiles, and some with a combination of materials. One that caught Beth's eye was made of tiny pieces of colored glass that were pieced together into a scene Rosa must have remembered from Peru—a mountainous landscape with a village in the foreground and an ornate church at the center.

The collages had themes, presented in fascinating intricate juxtapositions. In one, all kinds of first aid materials formed a starburst design of mostly whites, beiges, and browns with spatters of red, blue, and yellow. Beth distinguished blobs of cotton, bandages, swabs, thermometers, pill box labels, and much more, not noticeable individually in the design unless one focused.

A mosaic that appeared to be an adobe house and a child in traditional Peruvian indigenous clothing petting her llama turned out to be fashioned from board games cut up into jigsaw puzzle-like pieces. And one three-dimensional collage was created with objects one might find in a desk drawer—staples, paper clips,

file tabs, and so on. Up close, they appeared as a view from a hanging-file window frame of a manila-folder beach and paper-clip-and-colored-typing-paper tropical trees near a sea foaming with massive, staple-shiny waves. From a distance it became a scene one might observe from the window of an office near the Pacific in Peru.

“These mosaics are incredible, Rosa,” Beth said. “How do you get your ideas?”

“Sometimes I see something ordinary or an object that might be thrown away. I feel like it belong to me, and I have idea to make it into something beautiful.”

A low guttural sound from Psycho Cat, sitting under the mounted art with his ears back, caught everyone’s attention. Alana sidled close to the skittish cat and reached out with hesitation to sooth him.

“What’s wrong, Sylvester? Are you mad that nobody is paying attention to you?”

Something clicked in Beth’s mind, and she took another close look at a couple of the works. “And where do you find the...”

Beth didn’t finish her question because at that moment Wyatt, Lucia, Lucas, and Arnie burst into the room, Arnie brandishing a large brown, official-looking envelope. “It took some digging, but we found the policy,” Arnie said, “in a wall safe. Fortunately, Mr. Ramos documented the combination in a file on his computer.” He considered the envelope. “Most people reduce the amount of life insurance they carry after they retire, but he kept the benefit the same as it must have been since he bought it, probably for the sake of the kids and their futures.”

No one spoke, and Beth saw a blank look on Rosa’s face, as if she didn’t understand the implications. When none of them asked any questions, Arnie turned to Lucas and Lucia. “Tell your grandmother how much the policy is worth.”

“Five hundred thousand dollars,” they said in sync.

“Five hundred thousand dollars,” Rosa repeated. She gazed at the twins with pleasure but offered no further comments.

All the children were smiling. Lucia and Lucas looked triumphant, but Beth was sure none of them understood that money would solve only a small number of their problems. First and foremost, Beth decided she needed to figure out what steps she’d take to help them locate a relative who might become a guardian and take good care of the children and their grandmother.

In the midst of the silence, Missy turned her head from one to another of the people in the room. “That’s a lot of money, isn’t it?” she asked in an uncertain tone. “Is there five hundred thousand dollars in that brown envelope?”

Arnie stepped close to Missy and put an arm around her shoulders, but he looked at everyone as he spoke. “It is a lot of money, Missy, but it’s not in this envelope or even in this condo. I’m going to help Mrs. Ramos contact the insurance company and sign papers in order to claim the benefit. It’ll take some time before our friends can use the money.”

“Are you going to help her right now, Grandpa?” Wyatt asked with a smidgeon of impatience in his voice.

“It wouldn’t hurt for us to at least talk to the policy agent now. We’re going to have to gather information, and the agent can tell us what we need to have. I’m not sure if Mr. and Mrs. Ramos have social security numbers or another kind of I.D. If it’s okay with your grandma, I’ll stay here and make a call or two for Mrs. Ramos while the rest of you go to the pool to celebrate.” He looked at Beth for confirmation. She nodded.

“Yea!” was the general consensus from the kids. Beth collected Psycho Cat, and they all hurried off to change clothes.



## CHAPTER 26

### **ART SUPPLIES**

Lucia and Lucas sat waiting at one of the poolside tables by the time Beth and her three grandchildren arrived. The kids seemed energized, especially Lucas, and wasted no time splashing into the shallow end, diving under water, and swimming, dog paddling, or turning in circles as they interacted with each other.

Beth had her swimsuit under her shorts and top, but she laid aside her beach bag filled with all the pool paraphernalia—sunscreen, pool toys, water bottles, and such and sat in a lounge chair to watch. And think. The day had given her lots to think about. Rosa needing special care. How to find relatives and try to insure the life insurance money would be used for the children's future. What Alexei was doing in the building and why he was being surreptitious. Whether he was guilty, a threat, or was really helping H el ene and Fabienne. Beth hardly knew where to begin trying to help her friends. Everything about the penthouse situation was becoming more, rather than less, complicated.

Then, a mind picture of Psycho Cat, so real she could have reached out and touched him, blocked every other problem from Beth's thoughts. She saw

Psycho Cat making that deep throat growl she'd heard him make at doors throughout the condo building, at Rosa's wheelchair, and then today sitting on his haunches, ears alert, green eyes wide, eyeing the mosaics and collages. Beth's inner eye turned from the cat to Rosa's artwork—the materials used in the artwork—her memory of items she'd heard were missing from condos after the rash of break-ins over the past year or so.

Could Mrs. Ramos be the building thief? No. Wait. Psycho Cat liked Rosa. He never liked the bad guys—Beth had always found her cat would cozy up to good people, not thieves. Could someone else from that family have picked the locks and gathered small items for Rosa? Beth looked at the kids in the pool. Lucas? Lucia? Why would one of them do that when the family had plenty of money to buy those materials? How about Mr. Ramos? She hadn't heard of any break-ins since his death. Nevertheless, he could have just bought all of those collage materials, too, or brought some of them home from his own office when he worked.

Beth went over and over what she knew about Rosa, her dead husband, Lucas, and Lucia. She tried to remember everything she'd heard about the break-ins. Something Herman Houser said about Rosa crossed her mind, something about seeing the lady from the penthouse in the hallway on his floor. Of course, since they controlled elevator access to the tenth floor, any of them could have trolled a different floor at any time. Herman noticed Rosa because of her wheelchair. Still—why would any of them need to break into other condos?

While Beth was still wrapping her mind around the lock-picking mystery, movement drew her attention to the door on the other side of the pool. Arnie's backside shoved from the inside, and he stepped out holding the door open with one hand and pulling Rosa through in

her wheelchair with the other. Well, this must be a first. What couldn't that husband of hers accomplish with his charm? Or—maybe it hadn't taken much convincing. Rosa may have wanted to come to the pool for ages. Beth rushed over to help hold the door for the wheelchair, and the kids all stopped their frolicking to stare.

"We have a table and a couple of umbrellas for shade over there." Beth took the door from Arnie and pointed. "I'm so glad you decided to join us, Rosa."

As soon as Arnie turned the chair in the direction of the pool, Rosa took control of the wheels and headed for the table. Beth grinned when she saw Lucia climb out of the pool followed by Alana and Missy. They looked excited and would do a good job of making Rosa feel comfortable. Wyatt started for the steps on the shallow end of the pool, but when he noticed Lucas holding back, he stayed put. Beth couldn't read the look on Lucas's face. Could it be hard for him to accept that his grandmother would come to the pool without his say-so?

Her smile somewhat diminished, Beth pushed the heavy glass door until she heard it click. And just as it did, she saw Alexei's face peering around the corner of the wall that divided the back hall from the lobby. As suddenly as she saw it, the face disappeared. So—this was creepy. Hadn't they seen Alexei leave by the back exit an hour or so before? And why did he duck away as soon as he saw them?

Instead of going right back to the table, Beth crept to the gate that separated the pool patio from the sidewalk that led to the building's back parking lot. She opened it a crack and peeked out. Right out there was the spot where Mr. Ramos had lain after falling from the balcony above—she looked upward—only about four weeks earlier. Now, it was clean and showed no sign of the devastating event which threatened to ruin several lives in addition to the

victim's. Alexei wasn't out there. Beth shivered and walked to the poolside table.

The girls had pulled some of the patio chairs aside so the wheelchair would fit in under the table in a good position to see the pool. Alana and Missy were fussing around, moving the chair slightly this way and that, asking if she wanted a paper cupful of water from Beth's jug, and so on until Beth decided they both must take after their great-aunt Meg. Lucia held her grandmother's hand and smiled, while Rosa kept saying, "thank you" and "no, thank you."

"Hey, girls," Arnie said from where he'd taken a seat. "We came down here to see some swimming. Mrs. Ramos said she hadn't been to the pool for several years, and she'd like to watch from close-up instead of from up there on the balcony. Why don't you get out the ring-toss game? If I join you in a few minutes, we'll have even teams—unless you want to join in, Grandma Beth."

"No, I'll stay here and keep Rosa company."

Alana and Lucia found the game pieces in Beth's large carry-all and started toward the pool. Missy lagged behind a bit and turned to Rosa. "I'll show you how I can do a somersault under water, Mrs. Ramos," she said shyly.

Rosa's face featured a smile that would put Miss Universe to shame as she rose to the occasion. "I'd love to see your somersault, Little Missy," she said.

Beth beamed, too. She had no idea if Rosa remembered Missy's nickname or if she called young girls in general "Little Missy." But it didn't matter. Her words made Missy happy, and she skipped to the pool to show off for her new friend while the other kids set up the ring-toss game. Rosa watched Missy and clapped for her antics whenever she came out of the water.

Beth turned to Arnie. “Were you able to contact the insurance company and talk to the claims department?”

“I got through, and they’ll send the documents they need for Rosa to sign. She’ll need to locate a death certificate and so on, but I can help her with that. According to the claims department person, Eduardo Ramos had a work visa when he bought the policy, and later he got a green card, which gave him permanent residency status. I think all those I.D. numbers are in his files. He was pretty meticulous about keeping records.”

Beth spoke softly, although Rosa wasn’t paying much attention to her. “Is there anything in the files about the twins’ mother or father, or is there an address and telephone listing of relatives in Peru?”

“Sorry, I don’t know. We weren’t looking for anything like that. But I’m going to have to search the files again to find more for the insurance forms. I’ll look for an address book then. I can surf through the files on the computer, too, and maybe Lucas or Lucia will be able to help.”

“You’ll look soon, I hope.” Beth lowered her voice to a whisper. “Listen, go on out with the kids like you promised. I want to hear Rosa’s answer to a question about her art that I started to ask her earlier. Maybe I can get her full attention after you’re all busy in the pool.

“So—throwing me to the fish, eh? Okay, but don’t upset Rosa. She’s a little fragile.”

“Duh. That’s why I want to have a little private talk.”

For five minutes, Rosa watched the pool ring-toss game with obvious pleasure. After that, Beth could see that her attention started to wander. Rosa peered around at the patio furniture, empty of people. She looked up at the balconies climbing the sides of the condo building, at the sky, at the leaves of the trees

outside the fence, and at the cement patio itself. Finally, she looked at her hands while she stretched and curled them as if she needed something to keep them busy.

Beth scooted her chair closer to Rosa's. "I'm so glad our grandchildren met this week. Wyatt, Missy, and Alana wouldn't have had nearly as much fun in the pool with just Arnie and me."

Rosa turned toward her with a noncommittal expression. "Si."

"Alana and Missy and I loved your art, too. It was so nice of you to make a necklace for each of the girls."

Rosa sat silent with a slight frown on her face for just a moment. Then she nodded in an agreeable way and turned back to watch the pool game. It was as if she didn't remember making the necklaces.

"Rosa," Beth tried again, "you said you *found* the objects you used to make your beautiful collages. Where did you find them?"

"I find objects for my art..." Rosa paused but couldn't find the words to continue.

"Where? Where did you find all those materials for your art?"

Rosa's face lit up. "I find all those materials in my *home*." Rosa waved an arm toward the building.

"You mean you had enough bandages in your condo to make the big first-aid collage and enough buttons to use on the clothing-themed mosaic? You found enough colored glass and china in your home to break into pieces to make that huge mosaic on the south wall?"

"Si," Rosa said, looking very confident now. "I find pretty dishes and sometimes break, sometimes use glass cutter."

"Did Eduardo, Lucas, or Lucia bring materials to you sometimes?"

“Eduardo takes my art to a shop to be sold.” Rosa smiled at the memory that felt to her as if it were still happening.

Beth decided she'd have to continue this line of questioning another time. Maybe Rosa was tired from her unaccustomed outing. Her memory seemed so on-again, off-again that Beth might have to try several times until she caught Rosa with her on-again memory. Or maybe her grandchildren could question Lucas and Lucia about where all those materials came from. People usually didn't have eight or nine thermometers lying around the house or forty different buttons, or... Maybe Rosa meant that when she found an object she liked, she or her husband would buy more of the same.

The woman seemed to remember details of her past, like the description she'd given of her town on the way to Brookside that morning. Maybe if Beth tried a new approach...

“Rosa, how did you learn how to make your beautiful jewelry and mosaics?” she asked.

“When I was young girl, my mother takes me and my sister to big, big city market.” Rosa became animated, gesticulating as she spoke. “She finds something pretty on many different table. She put in basket and takes home. There, we help her sort the items so she could create pictures to sell. I watch and learn. Our neighbor makes jewelry to sell. She teaches me. I love creating art. Si, but going to school and getting a good job helps my family.”

Beth nodded. “And that job helped you meet Eduardo, too.”

“Eduardo.” Rosa's face changed from smiling and wistful to serious and maybe a little cold. Eduardo thinks my art is common, only for indigenous people and Mestizos. After Gabriela is born, I cannot be artist. I must be mother and wife.”

“But you are an artist here.”

“Yes, here I have not anything to do all day. I find pretty things and make art while children study. Eduardo lets me create my art when he is not home, as long as his meals are prepared. Children help me order parts for jewelry.”

Beth didn't know what to say. She looked out at the pool where Missy had just ring-tossed a winner and was doing a flip under water to celebrate. Wyatt complained that Missy got too much of a handicap, and Alana told him he should have to back up a foot because he was a year older. Arnie shook his head. “Come on, kids. We're tied up. It's your shot, Lucas.” Lucas scored a point, and Wyatt pumped his fist. Beth smiled. So much for middle school sophistication.

Finally, she put her hand on Rosa's arm. “Eduardo was proud of your art. He took it to the shop to be sold, didn't he? He knew its worth.”



## CHAPTER 27

### PSYCHO CAT'S CLUES

“Grandma,” Alana said in a low voice as soon as Rosa, Lucas, and Lucia had said their good-byes and closed their door, “you know how Sylvester pawed at those dents you showed Missy and me? The ones on the doors where someone picked the locks.”

“Yes.”

“And did you see how Sylvester pawed at Mrs. Ramos’s wheelchair?”

“Yes, I saw.”

“Well, it could have been those foot things—the metal holders where she puts her feet. They could have made those dents. They’re about the right height. And the arms of the chair could’ve made the scratches.”

Beth nodded.

“And Sylvester growled at the art on the wall. That art is made with little things like you said someone took from the condos.” Alana, with a worried look, slowed almost to a stop and put a tentative hand on Beth’s arm to hold her back, while Missy and Wyatt trotted down the hall with Arnie. She looked up at Beth with wide, serious eyes. “Do you think Mrs. Ramos could be the condo burglar?”

“It crossed my mind,” Beth said, not sure how specific she should be with her granddaughter about accusing a possibly senile woman of theft. But while they stood there, Alana’s face cleared.

“I think she did it,” Alana said, “but I don’t think she meant to be bad. Sylvester likes her, and he knows when people are good. I think she just needed stuff to make her designs, and she didn’t have any way to get them. So she found a way to hunt for them all over the building.” Alana took her hand off Beth’s arm and looked back at the penthouse door. “I just don’t know how she learned to pick locks. Maybe online?”

Beth turned to look at the door with Alana. “She used to work at a private detective agency.” Then she realized what she had insinuated. “I mean... This is just our theory for now, Sweetie. We can’t accuse anyone without proof.”

“What kind of proof?” Alana asked.

“Maybe she’ll admit to the break-ins if I ask the right questions. I don’t think anyone will press charges after they know her situation.”

“Are you going to question her?” Alana asked with her eyes wide. “Would she tell you if she broke in? Will she even remember doing it?”

“That’s the problem.” Beth sighed. “But don’t you worry about it. Grandpa and I will be seeing Mrs. Ramos when we help her claim her insurance benefits. I’ll have to find a time to ask her about where she found her art materials when she’s rested. Right now, Miss Nancy Drew, we need to get you inside and changed out of that wet swimsuit.”

Psycho Cat acted eager for attention when the family got home. Wyatt scratched his head and patted his back on his way into the bedroom to change. Missy kneeled to give him a thorough petting, and Alana joined her. Pretty soon, the cat was lying on his back with his tummy exposed allowing the girls to make over him. As soon as they showed signs of quitting,

though, he trotted to the hall storage closet where Beth was stuffing towels into a hamper and hanging her carry-all. He slid around her legs and pawed at her sandals.

“I know. You’ve been abandoned all day again, and it’s time to fill your food bowl.” Beth reached down to smooth the cat’s soft, yellow fur. “Meg called you psychic. I call you spoiled.”

Missy flew into the kitchen while Beth was pouring the kibbles. “Grandma, can Alana stay all night? It’s our last night here, and she wants to.”

“I think that’s a great idea. She has a toothbrush and pajamas here. But she’ll have to call her parents and okay it with them. They were planning to pick her up after dinner.”

Missy ran back to the hallway with a big smile on her face, called out to Alana, and bumped into Arnie, already showered and changed. “What’s the hurry, Miss Sunshine?”

“Can Alana use your phone to call her mom and dad to see if she can stay tonight?”

Arnie handed his phone to Alana. “Let me talk to one of them when you’re finished. We’ll have to decide when and where we’ll drop you off tomorrow morning, maybe on the way to the airport.”

He continued into the kitchen and pecked Beth on the cheek as she washed cat off her hands. “And which meal is on your list for this evening? I know we had a big lunch, but after that water workout, I could eat a bear.” He turned to Wyatt as he strolled up to the kitchen island. “How about you? Are you hungry?”

“Yeah, we didn’t have our snack at the pool today.”

“I have all the fixings for tacos,” Beth said and started to walk to the refrigerator. But she stumbled over Psycho Cat. She caught the edge of the kitchen island with her hands, pushed herself up, but stumbled again to avoid tromping on the cat’s tail.

Arnie rushed to catch her as she almost tumbled backward onto the floor tiles.

“Are you okay?” Wyatt asked.

“Thanks to your Grandpa, yes. I might have stumbled my way into an early grave a long time ago if it weren’t for him.”

“At your service,” Arnie said while scanning the floor to make sure it was safe to let go of his wife.

By that time, Psycho Cat had hightailed it into the living room and was busy licking a paw while watching the humans. As soon as Beth opened the refrigerator door, he was on his feet heading toward the kitchen. Alana detoured around the kitty when she delivered Arnie’s phone, which he took into the living room to map out a plan for Alana’s visit. Quick as the flick of a light switch, Psycho Cat appeared between Beth and Wyatt, who stood with a water glass at the sink.

Beth pulled packages of shredded cheese and lettuce, a carton of sour cream, green onions, and salsa out of the refrigerator. “We’ll each fill our own shells,” she said as she straightened up with her hands full. “I’ll fry...”

When she stepped, her foot caught Psycho Cat, and this time she fell backwards. All the food went flying. Alerted by an ear-splitting yowl, Wyatt spun around in time to catch his grandmother’s arm before she landed. Arnie and the girls came running while Beth, with Wyatt’s help, scrambled to her feet to survey the littered floor. Only the sour cream container had cracked open when it hit the edge of the counter. Beth grabbed a sponge from the sink.

Arnie ended his phone call and stood with his arms crossed. “I’ll tell you what,” he said, “I’ll get the taco fixings ready while you and the kids take that crazy cat for a short walk. Otherwise, he’s going to be under foot all evening, and you’re going to end up in the emergency room.”

“There’s Fabienne,” Missy said, pointing out the lobby windows.

Wyatt was taking his turn holding the leash. The plan was to walk the cat to the end of the block and then back, but the big cat took his sweet time sniffing at the elevator floor, veering toward the front desk, and kneading the textured floor runners on the way to the exit.

Beth turned her eyes from Psycho Cat to the direction Missy pointed. H el ene and Alexei each held one of Fabienne’s hands as the little girl pranced along double time to keep up. They were walking toward Brookside’s restaurant row, and as Beth watched, Fabienne kicked her heels in the air when the adults lifted her off her feet and swung her.

“Is that man Fabienne’s daddy?” Missy asked.

“No, it’s her—uncle,” Beth said.

Missy took Beth’s hand. “Can we catch up to tell Fabienne and her mommy good-bye since we’re leaving tomorrow?”

Beth looked back at Psycho Cat. Now, the feline sat on his haunches eyeing two women Beth knew from elevator rides.

“There’s my favorite kitty-on-a-leash,” one of them said as she headed toward Psycho Cat, holding out a hand for him to snuffle.

“I don’t think we’ll be able to catch up,” Beth said to Missy. “Sylvester doesn’t seem to be in any hurry today. He must want attention more than exercise.” She put her arm around her granddaughter. “We can stop by Fabienne’s condo tomorrow morning to say good-bye. Will that work?”

“Okay,” Missy said and skipped over to help the elevator ladies pet Psycho Cat. “Sylvester is Grandpa and Grandma’s cat,” she told them. “I think he likes both of you.”

Beth watched her gregarious granddaughter for a minute and then stepped closer to the windows to peer

again at the inexplicable threesome on the sidewalk. Alexei hoisted Fabienne and carried her across the busy street. H el ene walked alongside, her wide gestures suggesting an animated conversation. The three disappeared from view when they turned onto a side street.

Psycho Cat agreed at last to his walk to the end of the block and back. Alana took her turn holding the leash, and then handed it to Missy. Beth couldn't get her mind off H el ene and her disregard for Alexei's part in putting her husband in jail—maybe a bigger part than just being the money collector for a rebel group. Lucky she'd promised Missy they'd visit Fabienne in the morning. H el ene had some 'splanin' to do.

"Hurry up, Missy," Wyatt urged when they were close to the front doors, "Grandpa probably has the tacos ready."

"I can't help it. Sylvester keeps stopping."

"Sylvester's being his independent self," Beth said, "stubborn as a mule. I'll carry him in this time. You can hold the leash tomorrow morning when we go say good-bye to Fabienne."

Arnie had the taco fixings waiting on the counter. After dinner, Beth gave each of her grandchildren a role in helping to make snickerdoodles. Missy asked what a snickerdoodle was.

"They're old-fashioned cinnamon sugar cookies. These are for dessert, but let's save some to take to H el ene and Fabienne tomorrow morning. I think baby teeth can eat these soft cookies."

Wyatt's job was to place balls of dough on the cookie sheet, and he was so full of raw dough by the time he finished that he ate only one cookie after they were baked. The girls each ate two with milk, and Arnie munched down three of the fresh, warm treats.

Wyatt was the first one up, packed, and at the counter ready for breakfast the next morning. He

accepted the pancakes with bacon and cooked apples that Arnie dished up for him. But instead of eating, he hesitated with his hand on his fork. Arnie waited, and Beth came over to fill Wyatt's glass with milk.

"What's wrong?" Arnie asked.

"I know we're going to take cookies down and say good-bye to Fabienne this morning, but could we take some across the hall, too? I want email addresses for Lucas and..." He lowered his eyes to his plate while a hint of inner warmth appeared on his cheeks. "...and Lucia."

Beth glanced at Arnie with a tiny smile on her lips. "I can't believe I didn't think of that. A great way for you and Missy to say farewell to your new friends. I'll make up another plate of cookies."

Wyatt poured syrup on his pancakes and dug in. Alana and Missy appeared, Missy with a pink backpack full of plane necessities and Alana pulling Missy's wheeled suitcase.

"Bout time," Wyatt said with his mouth half full.

"We had trouble getting all of Missy's new stuff into this suitcase," Alana said as she stood it by the door. "Missy had to sit on it so I could zip it up."

"Mom told her not to take so much," Wyatt said.

"Come get some pancakes," Arnie said. "You two deserve a big breakfast after all that hard work."



## CHAPTER 28

### PEOPLE IN STRANGE PLACES

While Arnie clipped on Psycho Cat's harness and leash, Beth unlocked the front door, and Alana picked up a plate of cookies. "I won't take Sylvester's stroller this time," Beth said as she opened the door a crack. "We won't have much time to visit two families *and* take a long walk before it's time to go to the airport. Just to the end of the block and back again." She pulled the door open far enough to see down the hall. There stood Alexei in front of the penthouse. With an intake of breath, she pushed the door until just a sliver of an opening let her peek through. While she watched, Alexei knocked at the door a couple of times and, after waiting a minute, jiggled the knob. Beth raised a hand behind her back to ward off the kids and Arnie who were pressing forward to find out what she was doing.

"What do you see?" Alana whispered. Beth turned her head toward her family with an index finger to her lips. She peeked back through the crack to find out what would happen. No one made a sound. Even Psycho Cat stopped wiggling. Alexei may have heard them, or he may have sensed someone watching. He may have given up. For whatever reason, he glanced

toward their door, turned to the elevator, and pressed the button.

Explanations flew through Beth's mind. Alexei wanted to express his condolences. Unlikely. He went there to question the family about the voice someone heard the day Mr. Ramos died. More likely. To threaten them—a follow-up to the letter the police found? That's what she feared.

Beth held her breath until the man disappeared and then pushed the door shut. Pasting a bright smile on her face, she leaned against the door and turned to Arnie and the kids. Psycho Cat meowed, and she smiled at him, too. The whole family waited for Beth to explain.

"I saw Alexei at the penthouse door," Beth told Arnie with forced calm and then explained to the children, "Fabienne's uncle. It would have been rude for all of us to rush over to the penthouse right then. Nobody answered the door, and he left."

"So they aren't home?" Wyatt surmised in a low tone.

"Actually, the same thing happened to me when I first went to Rosa's door. They won't answer the door unless they know someone is coming. Missy, if you'll get the address book on my desk, I'll find the phone number Lucia gave you, and we'll call before we go."

While Missy ran to the desk, Arnie shot Beth a look and said, "I'll go with you this morning. The breakfast dishes can wait. I don't want to miss out on our last morning with these rascals before they leave."

Beth's uneasy smile brightened. "Good idea."

"While we're there, I'll make an appointment to help Rosa search for the rest of the information the insurance company needs and for you to help the kids find anything that might be tucked away about their relatives in Peru."

On the phone, Beth spoke to Rosa and then to Lucas, and Lucia was waiting for them at the

penthouse door when they arrived a minute later. Lucia took the plate of cookies with many thanks, and Rosa wheeled to the door to greet “Seal-vester” and hold out a hand to him. Psycho Cat obliged by jumping onto her lap and head-butting her chin. Wyatt waited with visible impatience through all the greetings and then asked for an exchange of e-mail addresses.

While the kids went off to the computer room where they could all send and receive each other’s messages, Arnie chatted with Rosa in his winning way and had soon made an appointment for him and Beth to search for information at 3:30 that afternoon. Beth debated with herself whether or not she should risk causing panic by warning them about Alexei.

“Rosa,” Beth said before the kids returned, “did you recognize the man who knocked at your door before I called?”

“He was one of Eduardo’s friends.”

“You didn’t let him in.”

“No. Lucas said we shouldn’t.”

“Was it Alexei’s voice the voice you heard the day your husband died?”

Arnie put his hand on Beth’s arm and frowned at her. She raised her eyebrows at him. Rosa looked deep in thought and didn’t seem to notice the exchange.

“I can’t remember,” she said looking sad.

“Lucas was right,” Beth said. “You shouldn’t let Alexei into your home.”

Rosa didn’t respond, but Beth noticed her worried expression. She doubted Rosa would remember the warning. At least, the kids were likely to follow their rule of not admitting most people into the penthouse.

Arnie called to the kids and then said to Rosa. “Don’t worry,” he said. “You’ll be safe and cozy here as bugs in rugs. And soon we’ll get you set up so you can go home. Would you like that?”

Rosa stroked Psycho Cat and nodded. Lucas and Lucia stepped closer to their grandmother and looked

at Arnie with wide eyes. Beth knew that going “home” meant something entirely different to them than to Rosa.

Beth said, “Your grandmother invited us to help her find birth certificates and such that Mr. Stockwell needs to fill out the insurance forms. We’re coming back at about 3:30 this afternoon—after we return from the airport. Will you kids help me look for information about your relatives in Peru while we’re here?”

Lucia nodded, but Lucas said, “Sure, we can look. But I don’t think we’re going to find anything. Grandma would have told us if there was anyone back in Peru who wanted us.”

Rosa stared at the cat, and the wrinkle between her eyes deepened a little.

As Arnie lifted Psycho Cat off Rosa’s lap, he swept past Lucas. The cat hissed and swatted a paw at the boy. Lucas reared back, and Arnie pulled Psycho Cat out of reach. The cat had never befriended Lucas, but Beth couldn’t imagine what made the unpredictable animal act that way.

“I guess Sylvester doesn’t want to leave your lap, Rosa,” she said while she stroked the feline sitting stiff in Arnie’s arms. “Don’t worry, Kitty. We’ll bring you back to visit.”

In the hallway, Beth rushed toward her condo door. “Go ahead and push the elevator button,” she called over her shoulder to Arnie and the kids. “The plate of cookies for H el ene and Fabienne is right inside the door.”

Alana sped after her grandmother and ducked inside when Beth unlocked the door. “Grandma,” she whispered, “I’m sure Mrs. Ramos got those things for her art by breaking into condos.”

“What makes you say that?” Beth whispered back.

“I told Lucia that I want to tell my mom about the mosaics and asked her where her grandma got all the

stuff she uses in her art. Lucia said her grandma finds things *in the building* that gives her ideas, and then they order more online.”

“In the building.”

“Yeah! And then Lucas said she finds her ideas in their penthouse condo. Lucia started arguing that her abuela used to find all her ideas at home, but for the past year or so she found things somewhere else. ‘No, you’re wrong,’ Lucas said and gave her a real mean look. When Lucia started to say something else, he shushed her.”

“Okay, that’s what I thought. Lucas is protecting his grandmother. Don’t say anything more about this, please, Alana. Mrs. Ramos is no longer breaking into condos and stealing, because she can’t get in and out of the penthouse by herself. She never stole anything very valuable. I’ll do what I can to take care of this with the condo folks.”

“I hope she doesn’t get in trouble.”

“So do I.”

On the sixth floor, Psycho Cat behaved well until they arrived at H el ene’s door. There, he pawed at the door and made the same rumble in his throat they had all heard whenever the cat became suspicious of something or someone. Beth and Alana inspected the door and found only a few scratches around the keyhole that could have been made over the years by residents opening their own doors.

“This is how he acts at the doors where the burglar broke in,” Beth told Arnie.

When H el ene answered the door, Missy held out the plate of cookies and gave a speech she must have practiced in her mind. “All of us made these cookies for you and Fabienne because we’re flying back to Oregon today...” She paused as if her speech didn’t quite explain it all. “I mean, me and Wyatt are going home. And we came to say good-bye.”

Hélène put her hands to her face in an act of surprise worthy of a soap opera star. “This is such a nice surprise, and I’m so glad to have met you while you were here to visit your grandparents.” She accepted the cookies, hugged Missy one-armed, and shook Wyatt’s hand, an obvious relief to the young man. “I’ve never been to Oregon. Is it a nice place to live?”

“Yes,” Missy said, and Wyatt nodded.

“And you live here in town, don’t you, Alana? So I might see you again soon when you visit your grandparents.”

Alana looked up at Arnie who nodded. Then, she looked at Hélène and smiled.

“Can we say good-bye to Fabienne?” Missy asked while she tried to peek into the room around Hélène.

Beth noticed Hélène was wearing a nice summer dress and jewelry and hadn’t asked them in. “It looks as if you’re ready to leave. We don’t want to keep you,” she said putting her hand on Missy’s shoulder.

“I was just ready to go out the door. An immigration lawyer is helping me fill out all the paperwork to renew my work visa so I can take the job offer I told you about—for the opening at Aixois. But let me get Fabienne. She’ll love to see you.” She looked at the floor where Psycho Cat sat very still. “And Sylvester, too.”

Hélène left them standing outside the door while she went into the living room calling for Fabienne. The toddler must have been focused on her toys out of sight of the entry. Beth heard her insist she couldn’t come because she was playing, and then her mother said that Beth and Sylvester and their visitors were here. A faint male voice—one with a Russian accent—told her they’d finish their game after she saw her friends.

Beth cut wide eyes to Arnie, but the next instant, Fabienne burst into the entryway and then stopped

with a shy look when she saw all of them standing in the doorway. Behind her came a young teenager with wavy red hair. It was the girl who talked to Beth after the eighth floor condo break-in a few weeks before.

In a tick, Fabienne spotted Psycho Cat, grinned, and toddled over to give him gentle strokes. She looked up at Beth for approval. Once received, she continued to kneel by the kitty but gazed at Beth's grandchildren with a special smile for each.

"Our friends brought us cookies. Wasn't that nice?" H  l  ne said. Fabienne looked at the plate and reached for a cookie. "You can eat one while Mama goes to her meeting. What do you say to the children?"

"Thank you. Merci."

"We're going home today," Missy said. "And we want you to remember us."

"That is so nice," H  l  ne said. "We'll both think of you warmly." Her words sounded sincere and even nostalgic, as if she were thinking of her own family back in France. "I'm sorry. Where are my manners?" With a motion toward the teen, she said, "Kimberly is here to sit with Fabienne while I go to my meeting. Kimberly, Mr. and Mrs. Stockwell and their grandchildren."

"I believe I met you briefly a few weeks ago," Beth said and received a nod from the girl.

Beth wanted to ask about Alexei so much that she had to swallow hard to keep from shouting, "What is that man doing here?" right in front of the children. Instead, she cleared her throat and turned her attention to the toddler. "Sylvester's going for a walk now, Fabienne. He'll have to visit with you later." She looked H  l  ne in the eye. "I'll be busy this afternoon, but would you be able to walk tomorrow morning with us? We've had so many activities this week that I haven't had time to ask how things are going for you."

H  l  ne hesitated a moment, as if thinking over her schedule. "Yes, can we meet in the lobby at nine

o'clock? We're going to see Fabienne's daddy later tomorrow morning, but we can take a walk first."

"Nine it is. We'd better go, kids."



## CHAPTER 29

### PAPERS AND DIARIES

“It’s going to be quiet in the condo without the kids,” Arnie remarked on the way to the penthouse that afternoon.

“And you won’t have anyone to show off your pancake flipping skills to,” Beth said.

“You mean you don’t like my fluffy buttermilk flapjacks?”

“That’s the problem. I like them too much, and I have the added pounds to prove it.” Beth patted her tummy.

Arnie raised his hands in a melodramatic surrender motion. “For the sake of sensible eating, it’s back to boiled eggs, oatmeal, and fresh fruit.” He put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “As far as I’m concerned, the more of you the better.”

Beth grinned up at him as she rang the penthouse doorbell. Lucia opened the door for them and led them to Eduardo’s office where Rosa and Lucas were waiting. One of the file drawers stood open, and Rosa held a folder on her lap while Lucas had pulled up a chair beside Rosa’s and appeared to be frowning in frustration.

“This is harder than finding the insurance policy,” Lucas said as a greeting. “Some of this stuff is from twelve years ago, and we’re not sure what we’re looking for.”

“Good news,” Arnie said holding out some papers he had stapled together. “I have the list of documents needed by the insurance company. It’ll be a matter of finding each one and marking it off the list. Or, if there’s something we can’t find, we’ll have to research where to send for it. Then, we have to fill out the forms and have Rosa sign.”

“Mr. Stockwell is an insurance specialist. You can count on him,” Beth said. “I came to help with a less-certain but important job. We need to find names and contact information for your relatives. Rosa, do you have an address and telephone book or a computer document we can look at?”

Lucas stood, and Beth could swear she saw his chest puff up. “That’s private,” he said.

Beth glanced at Rosa who looked down at her hands. “The information isn’t as private as you might think, Lucas,” Beth said. “The authorities could search for your family and find anyone who’s still living. And if they don’t find anyone right away, well...” She shrugged. “They could send you—wherever. We’d like to help with this so you don’t have to depend on people who don’t know you.”

“We can depend on ourselves,” Lucas retorted.

“Lucas,” Lucia said in a small voice, “we should let Mr. and Mrs. Stockwell help. Think how much they’ve done already.”

The boy threw a superior look at his sister. “Stay out of this, Lucia. You’re only a girl.”

There it was, Beth thought, the source of the problem. She looked at Arnie with an expression that said, “See if you can talk some sense into the boy. He might listen to a man.”

Arnie cleared his throat. "I guess Beth and I assumed you all understood. It's conference time. Let's sit, and I'll fill you in with all the grim facts. He ushered the family into their sitting room and pulled a chair to the front where he could look at each of them as he talked. "First of all," he began in a voice he might have used with his own kids when he needed to set them straight, "Beth and I could just leave." Beth saw Rosa's eyes widen with worry. "If we do, we'll be obligated to call Child Services or Immigration."

"You don't have to call anyone," Lucas said. "Our abuela can take care of us."

"Okay. Let's say we don't call. Your grandfather took his pension as a lump sum. It's all in the bank. You go ahead buying your groceries and clothes, paying the rent, using the insurance money, if you get it. Then, taxes are due, and you don't file. The IRS comes and finds out there's an eleven-year-old who can't legally sign the forms, and his grandmother doesn't understand how to file. You don't know how to file tax forms, do you, Rosa?"

She shook her head. "No, Eduardo does the taxes."

"Or," Arnie continued. "Your grandmother falls in the shower and has to be taken to the hospital, unconscious. The admissions office asks for insurance cards and a person who can give permission for her care and arrange for rehabilitation. An eleven-year-old doesn't legally qualify to sign for her care. Soon you'll be high school aged. Someone finds out you are being home-schooled. But you aren't. They look into the records and find out you've never been to school. They call child services. You get it?" Somehow, someone will find out your situation and inform the authorities. Then, you'll be subject to the directives of some agency."

Lucas slumped a little, and Lucia looked frightened.

"You will help us." Rosa stated.

Arnie looked at the twins. "Do you agree?"

Both kids nodded. Lucia looked enthusiastic, but Lucas wore a sour expression of resignation.

Arnie explained that he didn't know Rosa's legal status. He did know that the kids weren't born in the United States and...

"We're illegal," Lucia said in an undertone. "We found out from our civics studies. We asked Abuelo, and he told us that's why we don't go to school or let strangers in."

Beth thought about mentioning Rosa's illegal breaking and entering. Maybe there was a way she could keep the gentle lady from being arrested. Rosa could apologize for breaking in. She could offer to pay for fixing the doors. First, though, they should find a relative who would promise to care for Rosa.

"Don't worry," Beth said. "That's the reason we want to help you find a relative in Peru who'll take you and your grandmother in. And then, later, if you want to come back to the U.S., you can apply for student visas and perhaps find work here and become citizens if you so choose. You remember Fabienne, the baby you played with in the pool? Her mother can probably tell us all about visas."

"So let's get busy," Arnie said. "Lucas, you come with me. We need to finish these insurance forms while the gals look for the other stuff." He looked down at his papers as he walked off with the boy. "First we need a certified death certificate. Do you remember getting those after your grandfather passed away? You think your grandmother might have put them in the 'D' files, or somewhere else?"

Once Arnie and Lucas were busy in the office, Beth asked Rosa where she kept addresses and phone numbers. Rather than going to a desk drawer, as Beth had expected, Rosa wheeled to the closet where she kept her art supplies. On a shelf behind boxes filled with this and that, she had not only an old address

book filled with addresses, phone numbers, and birth dates, but also rubber-banded bundles.

“Did you know about this stash?” Beth asked Lucia.

“No, I’ve never looked behind all the art stuff. Why did you hide these, Abuela?”

“Your abuelo tells me not to speak about our families. It would confuse you and...” She stopped with her mouth open and nothing coming out.

Beth and Lucia stacked the boxes of art supplies on the work table and pulled out all of Rosa’s memorabilia. Besides the tattered address book, there were three photo albums, eight compacted stacks of letters in their envelopes, and four journals each labelled *Mi Diario/My Diary*. One of the diaries had a leather-like cover, one cover was padded cloth, and the other two were more like small spiral-bound notebooks.

Beth picked up one of the diaries thinking Rosa might have written about the children’s mother and father eleven years earlier. “Do you mind if we read through your diaries to see if there’s information about some of your relatives? They look old. Did you bring them from Peru?”

Rosa’s eyes glazed over as if she’d retreated once again into the past. “Gabriela. She brings her diaries and writes every day. To make sense of this thing that’s happened, I think.”

“Gabriela?”

“My mother,” Lucia whispered. She reached for one of the journals as if it were a sacred object she might defile with her unworthy hand.

Beth opened the cover of the diary she held, the cloth-covered one. Inside she found the name Gabriela Flores and entries starting, Beth mentally calculated, about twelve years earlier. She picked up one of the spiral bounds. The dates in that one started about two years later. What a gift for Lucia and Lucas. And, she

realized, what a cruel edict by their grandfather that didn't allow them to see these before.

She looked again. The earlier diary had been written entirely in Spanish, but the latter contained many pages mostly written in English. She removed the rubber band from one of the stacks of letters. The postage dates were five and six years old. They might be from relatives who still corresponded with Rosa. Would she remember? In another, older-looking bundle, dates were earlier. Surely, here they would find the special friend or relative who would help this family.

"We have a lot of work ahead of us, but I'm sure glad you two can read Spanish."

"What should we do first?" Lucia asked.

"Let's see. I could go through the address book and highlight possible contacts. Rosa, you can help me by telling me about each person in the book. You know, is it a relative, friend, acquaintance, deceased person and so on. That way, we can rule out unlikely prospects. Will you help me with that?"

"Si."

"Lucia, I know you want to read your mother's diaries. You'll have plenty of time to do that. But right now we need to get names and addresses. You can separate the letters by sender. Go through each pile and make new stacks." Beth looked around the room. "Over there on the coffee table. Look at the return addresses." She showed Lucia where to look, thinking the youngster might never have addressed a letter. "This one is from Carolina Ramos. As you go through the piles, put all the letters from Carolina in one stack. Understand?"

"Yes." Lucia picked up a banded pile of letters and headed for the coffee table. She'd be done in no time.

Beth sat down in a chair beside Rosa with the address book and a red marker. She opened the book

to the first page and then stopped. “By the way,” she said, “who is Carolina Ramos?”

“My husband’s aunt. A bad witch who wants our money.”

Beth flipped to the R’s and marked the entry for Carolina with an X. The questioning, remembering, and labeling proceeded at a slow pace. Sometimes Beth thought Rosa seemed to have forgotten who she was trying to remember. When that happened, Beth skipped to the next entry and came back to the one in question later. After forty-five minutes, she had half of the names marked with X, +, or \*. The starred entries were the most likely ones, the contacts to try first.

“Finished,” Lucia said as she sat on the sofa surveying her new stacks of letters.

“Great!” Beth said. “Now, I have three possible contacts here and more that are maybes. I’ll make a list for you to check against the return addresses. After each name, write how many letters were sent from that person and the date of the most recent letter.”

Lucia pulled a sheet of paper from her printer and brought it to Beth for her list of names. Beth just hoped the process wouldn’t eliminate too many. E-mail addresses were what they needed to make contacting the likely people go faster, or maybe telephone numbers. There were few enough phone numbers, some of them probably old, and she’d found only a couple of e-mail addresses.

“Contacting people by snail mail will be slow—snail-paced—but it might turn out to be the only choice we have for most of these people,” Beth said.

Before Beth, Rosa, and Lucia had finished, Arnie and Lucas strode into the room to say that they’d found everything they needed to fill out the insurance claim forms. “We looked everywhere for the death certificates,” Arnie said, “and then found them in a plain brown envelope sitting on top of the file cabinet

under a condo flyer and a Brookside shopping center advertising brochure. We only need one of them for this, and I filed the rest away under 'D.' I just need Rosa's signature here, here, and here, and I can finish filling these out and put them in the mail."

"We're not quite done," Beth said, "but we're making good progress. Lucia has something very special to show Lucas while Rosa and I work, and then we can work together to finish our list of people to contact."

Arnie went home to work at his desk, and Beth brought the completed list of Peruvian names and contact info home a short time later. "I'm going to draft a letter to send to these folks," she told Arnie. "There are a couple of phone numbers I'll let Rosa and the kids try. I wouldn't be able to talk to a Spanish-speaking relative. I think I need to write the letter first so I can give them an idea what to say before they waste a phone call. They can translate to Spanish."

"Did Lucia show Lucas the *special something* she found?" Arnie asked.

Beth paused from where she'd stooped to pet Psycho Cat when he came to greet her with a stretch and a roll on the rug. "Oh, Arnie, you would have loved to see their faces. We found a stack of diaries their mother wrote around the year the kids were born. The twins are going to read them tonight."

CHAPTER 30  
**SELECTED ENTRIES FROM GABRIELA'S  
DIARIES**

(Translated into English)



Oldest Diary (fabric cover)

**E**ntry:

I found you, Dear Diary, in the box of my things that Mama brought over when she was cleaning out to move to America. Maybe if I record my feelings here, it'll help me figure this out and get through whatever happens.

I miss Mama. Grandmother and Aunt Alicia help sometimes, but it's not the same. I didn't know how many questions I'd have after marriage. This isn't how Mama started out. She was older and not in school. But, she did have to make adjustments when she gave up her career. And for what? To wait on Papa and his family?

Mama, I hope you aren't lonely, and I hope Papa is treating you well in America. Better than in Tacna and Cusco where my grandfather and uncles approved of his machismo and chauvinism, and even the physical abuse. Is it too much to hope that he would see how women are treated in America and act with respect toward you? Every day, I'm thankful to be with Walter who is kind and understanding.

Entry:

Shame on me, Dear Diary. I have been busy and neglected to continue to write out my feelings each day as I had planned. Please understand. School, the apartment, my job at the coffee house, Walter, and now this nausea keep me in turmoil all day and all night. This evening, I'm feeling better, and I don't have a work shift until tomorrow afternoon after my classes. Serving coffee with a smile at five-thirty in the morning after late nights of studying is wearing me out.

So tonight I'll cook for Walter. It'll be a surprise for him when he gets home from his library job. Something good—no burritos. Poor guy. His mother cooked a full meal every afternoon, and I bring home burritos from the market at least three times a week.

You can tell, Diary, that I'm feeling more optimistic today. It's good to write when I'm up as well as when I'm feeling down. My insides are trying to tell me that my period will start soon. It's only a little late. There's hope, because I forgot the pills just two or three times when I was so rushed in the mornings. That's all. And Walter and I hardly find enough time and inclination for it to matter.

Walter and I are very happy together. After almost a year of marriage, we have no regrets that we didn't wait. No, that's not true. I can't lie to you, Diary. I regret that Walter's parents now refuse to help with his tuition and that my papa not only refuses to aid us financially but

almost refuses to talk to me since I married a mestizo whose family lives in Chile. It's not Walter's age for him. It's his racial heritage. Instead of one-fourth Indian like Mama, he is almost one-half Indian. And he's from Chile. Ay-ay-ay. Those old wars between Peru and Chile over territory have nothing to do with us. We're all people with the same ancestors—the same blood.

We've known Walter and his family since I was a child, and now he's studying business at the university with top grades, but that makes no difference to Papa.

Papa wanted me to marry a person of Spanish descent like himself. Maybe such a man's parents would look down on me, since I'm one-eighth Indian. My marriage to Walter is my father's worst nightmare. No, it's second. The worst was when his only son died as an infant, and I was born a female.

What am I doing? No more whining. I need to start Walter's meal. There are some candles left over from Christmas I can set on the table. I'll make the setting romantic. Wish me luck, Dear Diary.

Entry:

Our late dinner on Monday turned out to be a success. I surprised Walter. The aromas, candles, and music made him smile and touch me more than he has for weeks. Malbec from his family's winery complimented the food, and that deep, smooth wine might have contributed to the romantic mood after dinner, too.

Walter loved that I used his family wine in spite of my resentment of his father's decision to stop helping with expenses. It's unfair that a young man can be sent to war when he is eighteen, but his father doesn't consider him old enough to marry whomever he chooses. And if Walter chose a girl whose father is a bigot, does that mean he should be punished?

Walter assured me we'll make it on our own without help from anyone. He didn't mention children. A child will make it so much harder. I haven't told Walter yet. You, Dear Diary, are the first to know. Tomorrow, I have an appointment at the university health center.

My worries are many. How will I find someone who will watch the baby while I go to classes? Or, will I have to drop out of school? My job doesn't pay as much as I would have to pay a nanny. How could I afford to work? How could we afford school and our apartment if I don't work? Most of all, how will Walter feel about this news?

Those are my questions and concerns. But when I touch my stomach and look at my body in the mirror I feel excitement and love bubble inside of me.

Entry:

My dear, Dear Diary, I have to tell you my glorious news! A couple of days ago I found out for sure I'm pregnant. But that's not exactly what is making me want to dance with joy. It's Walter's reaction to the news. This wonderful husband is unlike other men I know.

I was so nervous to tell him we would be adding another mouth to feed at the beginning of our third year at the university that I shook. It was late in the evening when we were both tired after more than a full day of school and work and still had studying to do. I waited until we had eaten our chicken and rice. Lately, I don't have energy for much until I eat.

What was it I expected? Yelling? Blaming? Silence? Instead, Walter's eyes shone. He hugged me and felt my tummy and kissed the bare skin and then my lips. He's sure it will be a little girl who looks like me. I want a little boy who will grow to be just like his wonderful father!

Entry:

This afternoon, a rare break occurred when Walter and I had a chance to meet on the commons between classes and work schedules. He wouldn't let me voice my worries about having the baby when I first told him. I guess he wanted to bask in the anticipation for a while before we had to consider the problems.

I told him my concerns, and he said we have options. We could live with his family where he would make good money helping to run the vineyards. He wants to go back to the wine country after getting his business degree, anyway. In business school, he's learning industry practices that will help him market and sell the wines all over the world. If his parents object to that plan, he could quit school for a year and work somewhere else full-time so I can stay home with the baby until we save some money.

I'm willing to put off my education, but there's no way I think Walter should quit. I'm afraid he won't go back. I told him maybe he could continue classes part-time, even if he gets a full-time job. But he said the classes he needs now aren't offered in the evenings. Then, I suggested he could transfer to a public university where the tuition is free. He nodded but didn't respond to that idea. He's probably thought of it already and doesn't think the education would be as good.

At least now we've talked about it and know what the other is thinking.



## Second Diary (leather)

Entry:

Hello my new diary. You are a Christmas gift from Mama. I write to her often, and she knows how I rely on putting my thoughts in writing. In my old diary I fussed about how tired I became, wrote about how nervous I was about Walter having to quit school, complained about being let go by the coffee shop manager when I became too large, and shouted in print when I found out we were having TWINS.

Now, it's January, and the infants are taking more of my time than I ever thought possible. How I could ever have considered working and taking a few classes after the births, I'll never know. Lucas and Lucia are two weeks old. They're both perfect combinations of Walter and me. Walter is good, when he's here, about entertaining one baby while I breast feed the other. It's amazing that a human can produce enough milk to feed two hungry infants!

The new school year begins next month, but neither of us has enrolled. Walter is still working as a page at the university library during the summer break, but he's looking for a better job. Even full-time, the library job will barely keep us fed and clothed. We're asking around about a less-expensive apartment, but I'm confident Walter will find a good job so we can stay here.

With these two little ones, it'd be awful to try to move. It's hard enough to take them both with me when I go to market. Aunt Alicia won't come to the apartment to help. She has her own seven children and all those grandchildren. But she did give me a double stroller. Without that I'd have to strap one baby on the front and one on my back to go anywhere.

Entry:

The twins are becoming more precious every day. They're lots of work, but each time one does something new, I wait for the other to catch up. They are both so smart. I bought used baby books while I was still working, and my Lucas and Lucia are ahead of where they should be every time I check. I wouldn't wonder if they write these books in this way so parents will be proud of their children. It doesn't matter. I'd be proud if they were two months behind, because they are so adorable.

Walter found a job in a warehouse moving heavy boxes for a minimum wage. They told him he'll get a review after six months and receive a small raise if he does a good job. Six months from now the twins will need new clothes and larger diapers. Tomorrow Walter's going to start a weekend job as a busboy for a good restaurant. He has to work his way up to be a waiter and make tips. The only thing is that the babies will never see him. They go to bed soon after he gets home during the week, and if he works on the weekend, too...

Maybe I should get a waitress job on the weekends and let him stay home with the twins so he can learn to know them. We could switch to formula feedings. This is a plan we should discuss.

Entry:

Walter didn't like my plan for me to work weekends. He wants our children to be breastfed for the first year, if I can do it. They do seem to be thriving. Nevertheless, we're going to have to come up with some way to bring more money in.

Dear Diary, how's this for an idea? I could proofread term papers. I have a good grasp of grammar, spelling, punctuation... I'd look up the rules I couldn't remember. But would anyone pay a person without a degree to check their work?

Entry:

Yesterday, I pinned a flyer to the bulletin board in the student commons. It's an advertisement for my proofreading service. If I get any jobs, I'll have to work while the twins are asleep. Keep your fingers crossed for me. I mean your pages—keep your pages crossed for me, Dear Diary.

I told Walter about this last night after dinner, but he was so tired after working overtime all week at that backbreaking warehouse job that I'm not sure he was awake.

Entry:

I'm not making enough money proofreading to help us make ends meet. By the time I check my corrections against the dictionary or the usage book, I make less than two sols an hour. How did I know these papers would be so full of errors?

Now, Walter has a big idea about how he can make lots of money, save it all, and send us both back to school next year. He talked to a friend who spent a couple of years working on a cruise ship. The workers get free room and board and can send their wages back to their families. Plus, if they are friendly and helpful, like Walter, they can make lots of tips, usually in U.S. dollars. Single guys do it for the travel and fun and end up spending lots of their earnings on their shore leaves. But Walter's plan is to send us enough to get by and save the rest.

I can understand how much sense this makes. We went so far as to ask Walter's parents for help, but his father said, "You acted against my wishes. Now you must live with the consequences. If you come home, you'll have to live by my rules." Walter wants to figure this out on his own, without his father's decrees. But I don't want to agree to a plan that takes Walter away from us. The workers work seven days a week on the

ship for nine months before they get a leave to come home for a month. I'd miss him too, too much.

Entry:

Here we are, Dear Diary, moved into the tiny room that the twins and I will call home for the next year while Walter roams the world on shipboard. Am I being too cynical? To be fair, it's not Walter's fault. He tried to make a go of the two jobs, and we could have done it if it weren't for Lucas's illness. Those terrible three weeks. The ghastly amount of money charged by the hospital took all the rent money and more. We lost the apartment, and I had to agree to everything—Walter's cruise ship job, boarding with my grandmother's neighbor, selling much of our furniture.

Grandmother means well, but she is proving to be as much work as the babies. "Gabriela, will you pick up a few things for me when you go to the market? Gabriela, my knees aren't working anymore, and I'm having my knitting group at my house this week. I'll entertain the twins while you clean for me." Her idea of entertaining the twins is to put them on a blanket on the floor while she sits in her chair and watches television. They start fussing, and I have to feed or change them.

It's harder for me to continue my proofreading service this far from the university, too. Just as I'm starting to be in demand from word-of-mouth and can complete each job more quickly. There's a library nearby where I can print out the papers people send by e-mail, as long as Lucas and Lucia are quiet during my visits. Maybe I'll still be able to make enough to buy a toy now and then and some chicken to go with my rice and beans.

Entry:

In Mama's last letter I found a small amount of money she had saved from her household budget. "He doesn't give me much," she says, "but I buy things on

sale and keep the money when I have to return an item.” She tells me she can walk to the market near the high-rise building where Papa bought a condo.

Mama wrote about the apartment they rented when they first moved to the U.S., which was small but not nearly as small as the place where I live. She likes the condo Papa bought because it’s closer to shops and has enough room that Papa and she can be home, go off to different rooms, and not see each other for hours.

Oh, to have that kind of space. I wrote to Mama about the room I rent that has only a small bathroom to call a second room. When I told her about it, I tried to sound upbeat, as if I would recommend having one burner for cooking and a tiny icebox in the same room as we sleep because it’s easy to keep an eye on the babies while I cook.

Tell me to stop complaining, Dear Diary. Walter has to bunk with a stranger on his ship. At least we write to each other often and talk by phone once a week on his shore-leave day. There are only seven months and twenty-eight days left until Walter will be here!

Entry:

Dear Diary, after those first few episodes of dizziness and shortness of breath I told you about, I started breathing more deeply and drinking more water. That helped, but I still feel really tired. Hope I’m not coming down with anything serious. The kids need me to be well, Dear Diary. Grandma needs me, too. It’s getting harder for her to get around. Her children and the other grandchildren don’t come around often, probably because they know I live right next door.

No wonder I’m tired!!

Entry:

Something’s not right inside of me. I get dizzy at the market and have to stop and lean on the stroller.

Usually, I have time to stop and take deep breaths when I feel my chest hurt from lack of air. But I'm afraid one of those dizziness attacks will happen when I'm holding one of the kids and I won't have the strength to hang on.

There's no money to go to a doctor, but I went to a free clinic. I sat in the waiting room with the kids for almost two hours until both were fussing so much that I had to leave. Maybe Aunt Alicia will watch them for a couple of hours at her shop when it's not so busy. I've heard it takes hours to see one of the doctors or nurses, and I don't want to ask her unless I can't get this under control.

I haven't told Walter yet, but I wrote to Mama. Maybe she'll have some idea about what I can do. She always told me about the old Indian cures she learned from her father's family when she was a kid. Steam from the tea kettle helps for a short time. There must be something else. Sometimes I can barely breathe, and the babies' cries enter my head like poison darts.

Entry:

Finally, yesterday, my cousin watched Lucas and Lucia while I went back to the clinic. I went early and was called in after only an hour and a half. The nurse took my vital signs, a doctor listened to my chest and asked questions, and then the nurse came back with a printout containing a number she said I should call for an appointment to undergo tests.

"Where is the testing done?" I asked her.

"On the outskirts of Cusco," she said, "in the big, new medical building. It's only about seven miles from here, and the bus stops right in front."

"How long will the tests take?"

"A couple of hours or so. You should start early in case they don't get you right in."

What will I do, Dear Diary? Maria agreed to go into work late so she could help me today, but I can't ask her

to do that every day. She has a family to help support, too. I'm getting weak, too weak to properly care for my babies.

I wrote another letter to Mama. None of her remedies worked. As much as I hated to, I asked if she could come home and help me until I get better. I told her how Lucas and Lucia sleep curled against each other or with their legs across each other in the playpen I tucked into this small space. She'd love to hold them while they're so little and sweet.

Entry:

Tomorrow morning, I leave for the United States. Papa sent money for a taxi to the airport, I've paid my final rent, and Grandmother will store the few things I can't take along. Mama said that Papa learned about a doctor in Kansas City who is very good. Papa will pay for my care.

I was surprised that Papa agreed to help, but Mama talked to me by phone and told me he knows that Walter left, and he wants to see his grandson. "How about his granddaughter?" I asked. She agreed he wants to see Lucia, too, but I know he is more excited about having a boy in the family. The thing is, I know Lucia's sweet smile will melt his heart if he lets it.

Papa had to pay for two seats even though the twins are barely six months old. When I spoke to a nice lady at the airline, she told me they'd put the double stroller in storage, and I could take one of the stroller seats to strap onto the passenger seat beside me. I hope, hope, hope the babies sleep most of the way. Duet crying is no way to make friends on an airplane.

Getting to the Kansas City airport and transferring all our stuff to the shuttle Papa hired to take us to his home has me nervous. Not because I'm scared to do new things on my own, but because I'm feeling so weak. I'm

feeling like a little kid who falls on the playground and cries, “I want my Mama!”

Walter doesn’t know about this yet. He has enough to worry about. I’ll tell him all about our adventure after I’ve been cured.



Third Diary (red notebook)

Entry:

Dear Notebook, I brought my diaries to Kansas City, but Mama put them away somewhere. I bought you; rather Mama bought you for me, at the New Dime Store in Brookside, this small neighborhood that seems like a little village. There are different shops for food and clothing and other items, rather than the large markets we have in Cusco. There are huge trees and green grass and flowers in the summertime. It’s so weird having summer in July and August rather than in January.

Lucia and Lucas are eight months old now. Every day they learn something new. Lucia crawled around Lucas today and tried to pull herself up my leg. Lucas grabbed her clothing, and she fell on her behind. Mama says Lucia will soon be standing by holding onto furniture. She told me that girls develop more quickly than boys at this age. We don’t tell Papa when Lucia does something before Lucas.

The saddest thing about my decline is that I won't be around to watch my darling children grow. I know their father will love them, and I've told Mama and Papa that they are to take the children to him as soon as he can finish school and begin his career. But I know a mother is special, and I'm sorry to leave them at such a tender age.

Entry:

The doctor is wonderful. He spent so much time with me and also invited my parents to the visits. But it is too late. The cancer has already spread so that surgery would do no good. I could try chemicals or radiation, he told me, but they would only make me sick and not be able to kill all the destructive cancer cells.

I cry for the children, not for myself. The oxygen and pain medicine keep me comfortable, but I'm not able to breastfeed or pick them up to sooth their crying like I want. Their grandmother is wonderful, but they want their Mama. They won't understand when I'm gone.

Entry:

The hardest thing I've ever done was to e-mail Walter to tell him that I was sick and had to leave and take the children. For him to be saddled with two babies to support and raise alone won't let him finish school and start his wine business. I e-mailed so he wouldn't find out where we are by the postmark on an envelope or have the opportunity to talk me out of my decision in a phone call. He must not be weighed down with a responsibility that will block plans for his future.

I told Walter not to worry about the children. They'll be in good hands, and I've arranged it so he can reunite with them after he finishes school. I know Walter won't be happy about this, but I think he'll have a harder time than I did trying to raise them on his own, and his father has said his family won't help.

I'm trying to do the best I can for everyone. Even Papa has been good to us, and he and Mama will take care of the children and abide by my wishes to send them to their father after a few years. Mama will tell them about their father and me and about how much they are loved.

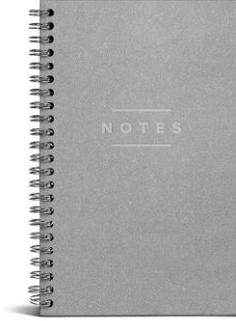
Entry:

I'll continue to tell you, Dear Diary, all the things on my mind as long as I have the energy to write. It helps for me to express my feelings to someone, and right now you are my best friend.

Mama bought two notebooks. The second one will be my gift to my children. In it, I'll tell them about their father. I've known Walter almost all my life, since we were children in school in Tacna when we lived near Papa's family. Walter's ancestors had lived there for generations, even when the province belonged to Chile. The grapes used in his father's winery come from the fertile Chilean vineyards owned and operated by his relatives. As a teenager, Walter worked in those vineyards.

My father's career in technical engineering could go only so far in Tacna, and the death of my brother made the town sad for Papa. After a few years, my father moved us back to Cusco where he met Mama. Walter and I kept in touch, and he came to the university in Cusco to be near me.

I want Lucas and Lucia to know how much they are loved, and I will strive to complete the blue notebook so they will always know their parents' history.



Diary Four (*History of Walter and Gabriela Flores*)



## CHAPTER 31

### **LISTS AND WEBSITES**

After dinner, while Beth and Arnie sat watching TV and trying to keep their eyes open after their long day, the doorbell rang. Beth curled up in her chair and glanced at Arnie. Who would be visiting at this time of night without advance notice? Could it be Alexei? Was he suspicious that she knew too much about the money he took from Viktor Lutsenko and Eduardo Ramos for his cause?

Arnie went to the door and looked through the peephole. “It’s the twins,” he said.

“Oh, no,” Beth was on her feet in an instant, “I hope nothing happened. Is Rosa with them?”

Arnie unlocked the door and pulled it open. “Come in,” he said. “What brings you two over this evening?”

Lucas walked through the door with Lucia on his heels. He held up two of the diaries they’d found that afternoon. Lucia held the cloth diary against her heart with both hands. They both wore serious expressions.

“We finished reading these,” Lucas said.

“We learned about our father,” Lucia said. “And we know why our mother brought us here.”

“And I think I know why our father didn’t find us after our mother died,” Lucas said. “My abuelo hid us

from him for all these years.” He said this in a flat tone as if it were a fact that was hard to admit.

“Abuela admitted it,” Lucia said. “They promised to take us to our father, but they didn’t.”

“We don’t blame Abuela,” Lucas said. “I know our grandfather would have punished her if she had told the whole truth.”

“The diary tells us his name and where his family lives,” Lucia said. “Do you think you can help us find him?”

“We can try,” Arnie said. “If we can’t find him online, maybe we can find a relative who’ll help us find him.”

“There’s a fourth journal,” Lucia said. “My mother wrote the history of our family. It’s long, and we haven’t had time to read it yet, but it might have more names and places.”

“Good,” Beth said, “bring the diaries over here to my desk, and I’ll make a list of the names and places you’ve found so far. We can check it against the list of names from the address book and letters, too.”

“Mrs. Stockwell loves lists,” Arnie said with a grin and put his arm around her shoulders, “but this effort may be her best ever.”

The two children gave Arnie blank looks. Lucia said, “I put markers in the pages I thought were important.” She glanced at the treasure she held.

Beth skimmed the diary pages Lucia had bookmarked. She emitted sighs and exclamations as she read, and she read several of the entries out loud to Arnie. “Listen to this,” she’d say and then read the excerpt with expression. She looked at the kids to quip, “Your mom, Gabriela, was a good person.” One time, she commented, under her breath, “Well, no wonder the poor girl had to bring her babies here.”

When they’d gathered the few names from the diary, Arnie put his laptop on the table, and all of them gathered round to research the name Walter

Flores. From the diary entries, they could estimate his age.

“We know he was married to Gabriela, and his family grew grapes and made wine in Chile and Peru,” Arnie said. “I hope we can find some possibilities tonight. Then, you can search the fourth journal for more information—like Walter’s middle name or names of his family members. If he’s alive and online, we should be able to find him.”

Arnie started with the name Walter Flores and found hundreds, many of them musicians or soccer players. After attempts to find him in Peru, on a hunch, Arnie typed into the search engine “Walter Flores Chile wine.” In the very first hit, they found a winery in the Valle del Colchagua wine-growing region of Chile. “Walter Flores is the fifth generation of his family to lead this exceptional estate...” stated the website.

Looking at a photo of the man on the next page, Lucia grabbed hold of Beth’s arm. “Is that my father?”

Arnie held up a hand to calm everyone. “There are many men named Walter Flores, as I’m sure there are many girls named Lucia Flores. We need to keep looking, find all the possibilities, and then narrow them down. Don’t get too excited yet.”

“But that *could* be our father,” Lucas said, his eyes wide.

“Let’s read more,” Beth said.

Arnie clicked to another page on the website. “Listen to this. It’s a quote from a reviewer for *Wine Advocate*. That’s a magazine that rates wines and wineries. “Few have done more to promote Chilean wine than Walter Flores. His work has been colossal, bringing his estate into a new era where it is acknowledged as a producer of world-class wines, and opening eyes around the globe as to Chile’s incredible and diverse sites.”

Beth clasped her hands to her chest. "I hope that's Gabriela's Walter. If so, it means he realized his dream."

"They grow Malbec grapes," Arnie said after scrolling farther. "Didn't one diary entry talk about a Malbec that was a family-grown wine?"

"It's in the first diary," Lucas said. He took it from Lucia's hand, and searched the bookmarked pages. "Here it is."

Beth looked. "Yes, but it doesn't say the name of the estate. That would help. Gabriela could have put that in the final diary, though."

Arnie went to Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn and searched for Walter Flores. He typed in different search terms and looked for a Peruvian Walter Flores. The vineyard owner in Chile turned out to be the match that fit best, but Arnie bookmarked two other pages.

"It's ten o'clock," he said, "Your grandmother will be worried about you. Why don't you go home, get some sleep, and read the family history tomorrow morning? I have golf early, but we can continue the research in the afternoon. How does that sound?"

"Will one-thirty work?" Beth asked.

Both children nodded.

"Be sure to make a list of names and places we can use."

Lucas and Lucia gave Arnie knowing smirks.

"I know—lists. But you've got to admit they've been helpful. Bring your grandmother, too, if she's feeling well. She may be able to identify your father from a picture on the Web. From what your mother wrote, I think your abuela met Walter before she left Peru. She can hold Sylvester while we continue the research."

Later, Beth put her toothbrush away and turned to Arnie, "Let's say we find the right Walter Flores. Let's even say he wants his children, and we find a way to get them there. That doesn't mean he'll take care of

Rosa. After all, she helped hide the kids from him all these years.”

“You found other names in the address book. We can contact some of Rosa’s relatives or friends in Peru.”

“There’s something else about Rosa, and I’ve got to figure out what to do.”

“What? Her memory problems?”

“No. Her breaking and entering problems.”

Beth explained what she suspected about Rosa being the lock-picking condo thief. She told Arnie that she wanted to tell someone about it who would make a deal to let Rosa pay damages but not press charges. If Rosa had a place to go before they made the deal, it would make it easier.” At first, Arnie insisted she had to tell what she knew, either to the police or to the condo management.

“I dealt with the manager, Ms. Helper, when I told her about the problem we were having with the elevator. She was no help at all. She didn’t seem to have any interest in any of the residents’ problems. I’ve no doubt she’d press charges without thinking about Rosa’s condition.”

Arnie considered in silence. As he climbed into bed, he said, “The break-ins have stopped. Let’s finish this business of locating relatives, and then we’ll figure out what to do about Rosa’s break-ins.”



## CHAPTER 32

### INNOCENCE OR GUILT

The next morning, Beth awoke excited. Not as excited as Lucia and Lucas must be, of course, but eager to find a Walter Flores or two that they could contact. If none of them turned out to be the father, they'd have to start contacting different relatives. That would be disappointing.

First, though, there were problems. She hoped to solve one of them during her walk with H el ene and Fabienne. After Arnie left for golf, she readied the tiny cat stroller and confessed to Psycho Cat her ulterior motive for their outing. "We need to find out why H el ene is seeing Alexei. She says he's helping her. Well, would you accept help from someone who might have killed a man and framed your husband for it?"

"Vesther!" Fabienne squealed the minute H el ene opened the door for Beth.

The toddler had followed her mother to the entry and now pattered over to the cat. Instead of grabbing a handful of fur, she patted him on the back with a chubby hand and looked up at Beth.

"Sylvester loves gentle pats," Beth said. "You're a fast learner, Fabienne."

Beth carried Psycho Cat's stroller, H el ene pushed Fabienne's, and the little girl toddled along with the

cat. In the lobby, Beth let Fabienne help hold the leash.

Al rushed from behind his desk to hold the front doors open. “Well, well, don’t tell me you’ve become a cat walker, too, Miss Fabienne.”

Fabienne pointed to the stroller Beth carried on her shoulders. “Vesther trorrer,” she said.

“Ah.” Al nodded and smiled, looking not at all sure what Fabienne meant to say.

“If I leave my key with you,” H el ene said, “will you please give it to my friend, Alexei, if he arrives before we return?”

“Glad to.” Al took H el ene’s key holder and jiggled it. “You ladies have fun now.”

Down the sidewalk in front of the building, Beth and H el ene had all they could do to keep Psycho Cat and Fabienne walking forward and staying on their feet. At one point, Psycho Cat rolled in the grass, and Fabienne rolled on top of him. Where the Trolley Track Trail began, both charges were tucked into their strollers. The women pushed the carriages side-by-side and giggled at Fabienne as she chattered and gestured to the cat.

“So,” Beth said after they’d gone a short way. Beth knew she had no business interrogating H el ene. That was the police detective’s job and the attorney’s priority. But she had to find out what was going on. Would she know if H el ene lied?

“I’ve seen Alexei in the building quite a bit this week,” Beth said. “I know you told me he was helping you, but are you sure he’s coming around to help? Or is he staying around to convince you that he’s innocent? You know you can tell me if you’ve been threatened, and I’ll find a way to protect you.”

“No, it’s not what you think.”

“You told me that Alexei funded his political group with Viktor’s money, and just yesterday, I saw him in my hallway trying to get into the penthouse. Why

would he go there? And every time I saw him in the lobby, he skulked away as if he'd been spying on us. What am I to think?"

Hélène's eyes grew wide. "I don't know why he was at the penthouse or why he avoided you. He's been helping me by staying with Fabienne for short periods and by driving me to the immigration office and to the jail. And... I told you that he explained how our money was used to help everyone in the village where Viktor's family lives."

"But don't you suspect him of pushing Mr. Ramos off the balcony and then framing Viktor?"

Hélène looked down at her daughter, now telling Psycho Cat about a toy that was tied onto the tray of her stroller. "No, not anymore. After we found out about the money situation, the police investigated Alexei's background and his alibi for the day of the murder. Alexei couldn't have done it. His delivery that morning took him to one of the company's new customers. Several of the kitchen staff and the restaurant manager saw him there most of the morning and afternoon. Each one of them said he didn't leave until almost three o'clock. He helped with set-up and storage as well as the delivery."

Beth frowned. She had been sure Alexei was guilty and that it would only be a matter of time before the police found the evidence to prove it. "Are you sure? Who told you about the alibi? Alexei?"

"Viktor's attorney, Mr. Montorlee, told me. I wouldn't have allowed Alexei to visit us again unless I'd been sure he was innocent."

"Are there any other suspects, then?" Beth was immediately sorry she'd asked when she saw Hélène's eyes water, her shoulders tense, and her face contort as if being twisted like a plastic bag. "Oh, no," Beth said. "You're not a suspect, are you?"

"No, I'm not," Hélène said with a sniff. "The problem is there *are* no other suspects. Mr. Montorlee said that

the police would consider the possibility of suicide if it weren't for the letter that Viktor supposedly sent. Viktor swears he didn't do it and doesn't know where the letter came from, but he doesn't have any other ideas, either."

"I didn't ever meet Mr. Ramos, but from what I've heard, he doesn't sound like a man who would be easily intimidated or overpowered. Is there a possibility he could have ignored the letter and then fallen by accident while he was watering his hanging plants?"

"We—Viktor and I—asked that. It's something about the trajectory of a falling body. It didn't fall straight down. He had to have been pushed."

"Oh."

Hélène stopped in her tracks causing Beth to halt and back up a few paces. Fabienne craned her neck around to see, and Psycho Cat opened an eye and said "Meow" in a mild, questioning manner.

"What's wrong?" Beth asked.

"It just occurred to me. There's no reason I can think of that Alexei would be trying to break into the penthouse."

"I didn't say 'break in.' He was trying to *get* in. He rang their bell and rattled the knob, and he knocked on the door a couple of times, but he didn't try to bust it in. Guess I need to watch how I say things."

"Still... What would he have to say to the widow? She must still be in mourning."

"In her own way, I'm sure she is."

Beth thought about telling Hélène about Rosa and her road toward dementia. She wanted to mention the two grandchildren who had already formed a small friendship with Fabienne, but she bit her tongue, recognizing that Hélène didn't need to feel worse about the tragedy.

"What do you mean by *in her own way*?" Hélène asked. "Do you mean she doesn't seem to be mourning?"

“Rosa’s in a wheelchair, and she seems shy. Spanish is her first language. And...” Again, she should try to learn to be careful what she said. What if H  l  ne found out about Rosa’s dementia and decided to inform the police or child services about Rosa’s condition before she and Arnie could find the father?

“A widow with two children to support.” H  l  ne shook her head—a slow, sad commentary. “Those kids do have a lot in common with my Fabienne.”

“Your friend took the key and went on up,” Al told H  l  ne as he opened the doors for them.

“Thank you,” H  l  ne said. “I thought he might get here first.”

“Do you mind if I go to the condo with you?” Beth asked. “I’d like to find out what he was doing at the penthouse door. It scared me to see him there, and it scared Rosa and the kids.”

“I also want to know,” H  l  ne said. “Yes, come with me, and I’ll ask him.”

At H  l  ne’s condo, the door was locked, and there was no response when she knocked and rang the bell. She called through the door and knocked again, but no answer. “He has my key,” H  l  ne said with an incredulous look.

“Could he be...?” Beth felt numb.

“I’ll go with you. If Alexei is secretly harassing those people, I want to know why.”

On the way to the tenth floor, Beth and H  l  ne guessed at reasons Alexei might have for trying to visit the penthouse. Beth thought he might think Rosa had access to Eduardo’s money and might be talked into giving to his cause. H  l  ne suggested there might be another separatist in Kansas City who was the actual killer and was working with Alexei. She was having trouble trusting the man now, since he was sneaking around behind her back.

Beth got nervous about Rosa and the twins after H  l  ne talked about there being another suspect in

cahoots with Alexei. Alexei could have helped that person frame Viktor. Maybe they should have asked Al to go to the tenth floor with them. Should she call the front desk or call 9-1-1? What would she say? They weren't even sure Alexei would be there. He could have gone outside for a smoke!

"Does Alexei smoke?" she asked H  l  ne.

H  l  ne raised her eyebrows. "No."

Just then, the elevator stopped. Standing on the side where the door was sliding open, Beth peeked out diagonally across the hall toward the penthouse door. No one. She rubbed a clammy hand on her shorts and started to assure H  l  ne, but Psycho Cat burst through the door and down the hall toward her own condo, pulling Beth along by the leash. There stood Alexei with his fist on her door. He turned toward them and lowered his arm.

"Psycho Cat, stop," Beth yelled.

"Exeye," Fabienne yelled from her stroller.

"Alexei, what are you doing?" H  l  ne yelled while pushing the stroller full-speed toward him.

The man looked from one to the other of them as they sped down the hall but ended with his eyes on the cat. Psycho Cat stopped four feet from the door and sat on his haunches with his ears back and his tail flicking. Beth stepped up beside her feline friend, and in another second, H  l  ne joined her and scooped Fabienne out of the stroller and into her arms. Fabienne, with an arm around her mother's neck, stuck her thumb in her mouth and watched the proceedings with big eyes.

Beth felt a little less shaky with Psycho Cat looking as if he was ready to pounce. At least, she thought he would protect them. And he was big enough to at least throw the man off balance if he tried anything. She'd have time to punch three numbers on her phone.

It seemed H  l  ne didn't have the same qualms about confronting Alexei, because she addressed him

in a huffy voice. “Alexei, what are you doing up here? You’re scaring us. Why have you been knocking on the penthouse door and now Beth’s door? Tell us.”

Alexei didn’t move from his spot, but he frowned and looked away from the watchful, tiger-striped guard cat to face H el ene. “I’m not here to harm anyone, if that’s what you think.”

“What, then?”

“I want to talk to Mrs. Ramos, and she would not answer door.” He looked at Beth. “I came to ask you to help me talk to her. I have seen you with her family.”

“If you wanted to talk, why did you avoid me every time you saw me in the lobby this week?”

“The youngsters were with you. This...” Alexei gestured toward Fabienne, “...subject is not for children’s ears.”

“I understand,” Beth said, “What do you want to talk to Rosa about?”

“To ask her if she is sure she heard a Russian accent. To find out if her husband said anything about the money he gave Viktor. He could have written that letter to blackmail Viktor by threatening to give it to authorities. Eduardo did not give for free. He had not a pure heart. There must be others who would push him off balcony.”

“What do you mean he didn’t give the money to Viktor for free? What did Viktor have to do in return?”

“Viktor has contacts, you know, all over city. He can get fake social security numbers for Ramos family. Eduardo planned to keep family here after he left job. He paid money, part for identification and part for bribe. But Viktor took money only for sake of his family in Ukraine.”

“Then,” Beth said, “how do you know Viktor didn’t push Mr. Ramos?” H el ene gasped, and Beth turned to her. “Sorry, but if Mr. Ramos took away the money he was giving to Viktor, after Viktor had taken the risk to make help him out by getting new identification,

wouldn't Viktor have been mad enough to have a tussle with the man and push him?"

"Viktor would no do that." Alexei said. "He felt bad arranging for the identification. He's a good man."

Hélène stepped past Psycho Cat to Alexei and turned to face Beth and her kitty. "I believe Alexei. Will you help us speak to Mrs. Ramos, Beth? It must have been someone else who had a reason to push her husband. Maybe she can remember something about the voice that would prove it wasn't Viktor."

"Well, I... That is, I don't think I could talk her into speaking to you. And, wouldn't that be called interfering with an investigation, or something like that? I think you'd better tell Mr. Montorlee your suspicions and see if he can talk to her."

The two looked disappointed but didn't argue. Beth watched Psycho Cat as Hélène put Fabienne into the stroller and pushed it toward the elevator. The alert cat sat immobile except for his twitching tail tip, his eyes radiated cryptic green judgement, and he turned his head as the three passed by.

Beth felt as if she needed to offer something. "Is there some other way I can help you?" she asked. "I'll sit with Fabienne sometime for you."

Hélène stopped and turned toward Beth. "Thank you. You are so good to us. I have another appointment at the immigration office tomorrow morning, and Fabienne will be disruptive. Alexei is busy. Will you be free from nine-fifteen until about ten-forty-five?"

"Absolutely. If you'll bring her up here. Any time after nine. We'll have fun, won't we Fabienne?"

"Thank you. That will make my morning much easier. Say good-bye, Fabienne. We'll see Beth tomorrow."

Fabienne waved from her stroller. "Au revoir," she said to Beth and then, "Bye Bye, Vesther."



## CHAPTER 33

### WALTER FLORES

“So now I don’t know what to think,” Beth told Arnie that afternoon. He didn’t get home from his golf until almost one o’clock with the excuse that his buddies had talked him into staying for lunch so they could discuss a tournament coming up in Oklahoma. Beth followed him into the bedroom as he prepared to take his shower so she could tell him, before Rosa and the twins arrived, about her conversation with Alexei and Hélène. “They’re sure Viktor is innocent, but I’m not so sure. Alexei claims there’s another Ukrainian separatist in town who might have been involved.”

“Did you tell them to talk to Viktor’s lawyer?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then, that’s all you can do.”

By the time the doorbell rang, Arnie had his laptop on the kitchen island ready to continue the search for Walter Flores. “Someone taught that family to be punctual,” he said. “They arrived by computer time at exactly one-thirty.”

“Probably forced into precision by that dictator they answered to,” Beth whispered as she headed for the door.

“Don’t speak ill of the deceased, Beth.”

She rolled her eyes and opened the door. Lucia pushed Rosa through the door, and Lucas entered carrying a typewritten list of names. He passed Beth and held it out to Arnie.

“Our mother’s last journal provided names of relatives on both sides of our family tree. We have other grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins in Tacna, Peru.” Lucas took a deep breath. “And we think the man we saw on the Chilean winery website must be our father. Don’t we Lucia?”

This was the first time Beth had heard Lucas consult his sister about anything. She saw Lucia nod with what seemed both excitement and trepidation.

“We both think the name of the estate in Chile my mother wrote about, Viñedo Cuenca Callada, is the same as the one on the website, too. She wrote that it belonged to a branch of our father’s family for generations. Our father worked there during the summers when he was young.”

Arnie turned to the keyboard. “Let’s fire this thing up and find out for sure.”

A few minutes later, Arnie had the Viñedo Cuenca Callada Estate website on the screen. “That’s the one—the same website we saw last night. The picture of Walter Flores is here somewhere.” The twins positioned themselves on either side of him as he clicked and scrolled to the page with the photo.

Lucia turned to her grandmother who had rolled her chair into the living room upon Beth’s invitation. “Abuela, please come see if you recognize the person in this photo.”

By this time, Psycho Cat had moseyed out of the bedroom and climbed onto Rosa’s lap. The lady cooed and stroked the purring animal. She gave Lucia a blank look. It looked as if she had a hard time thinking about two things at once and that she preferred petting her Sylvester buddy over staring at a computer screen. Beth couldn’t blame her.

“Rosa,” Beth said, “I’m going to feed Sylvester while you help Arnie and the children with their research. Okay?” Without waiting for a reply, she hefted the cat and took him to his food bowl in the laundry room off the kitchen.

“That man looks a lot like Diego Flores,” Rosa said when the children pointed out the picture on the screen. “Is it Diego?”

“This man is Walter Flores,” Lucia said. “His father was Diego.”

“Humph,” Rosa scoffed. “Walter is just a youngster. Gabriela favors the young man. I understand. He’s nice-looking and the smartest boy in her class. His father, Diego, is of an old Spanish lineage. But your abuelo won’t permit it. Walter is Mestizo—like me. His mother is Indian.”

Lucas let his features grow soft. “Abuela, you are remembering a time long ago. We read it in our mother’s journal. You knew the Flores family in Tacna when Gabriela and Walter were children. Gabriela grew up and married Walter, and now Walter must look like his father.”

In the time it took Psycho Cat to lope from his untouched bowl back to Rosa’s side, the current time era in her mind switched from three decades to one decade previous. “Eduardo still doesn’t approve of Walter Flores. He will accept Gabriela back only if she leaves her new husband. I might never see my grandchildren.”

“Abuela,” Lucia said. “We are your grandchildren. Gabriela died. And the man in the picture is Walter Flores.”

Rosa bent forward and squinted at the screen. “Walter Flores. Older and more distinguished-looking than when he was at school. Lucas, Lucia, there is your father.”

“Does he know we’re here? Does he want us?” Lucas asked.

“Eduardo hid you and wrote to Walter that you and your mother died together in an auto accident. He didn’t allow Walter to come here to get the ashes he claimed to be keeping.” Rosa broke into sobs. “I wanted to tell him I was taking care of you for him, but Eduardo convinced me otherwise. He said you were better off with us than with a young man who would leave his wife and newborn twins alone. And I love having you here with me.”

Silence. Beth couldn’t think what kind of response there could be. Lucia gave her grandmother a tentative pat on her arm and then looked at her brother.

Arnie turned to the computer. “I think we’ve found your father. Now to contact him. We’re going to have to think about what to say. If I was a guy who believed his children died ten or eleven years ago, I’d have a hard time believing they would suddenly show up and want to be taken in after I’d inherited a vineyard and become successful.”

Rosa, again with Psycho Cat ensconced on her lap, sniffled. “Lucas looks like Walter as a child.”

“That’s one thing we can do,” Beth said. “Send pictures of the children. Of their grandmother, too. And lots of details from Gabriela’s journal.”

“I’ll have to see if I can find a personal website for Walter. The vineyard site has a telephone number and an e-mail address for the main office,” Arnie said, “but a message through those channels will go to an employee, not to Walter Flores. I’ll see what I can find.”

“While you’re doing that, we’ll try some of these telephone numbers we found in Rosa’s address book. You kids will have to do the talking. I can barely say please and thank you in Spanish.”

They talked about what they would say to their grandmother’s sisters. “Ask to speak to someone who knows English so I can talk,” Beth told them. “I’ll need to discuss with them how to arrange for your

grandmother's—you know—about your grandmother moving back to Peru with her health issues.”

It took several phone calls and first Lucia and then Lucas trying to explain Eduardo's death, Rosa's situation, and their mother's story to incredulous relatives. Finally, late in the afternoon, Rosa's sister, Alicia, put her son on the line. He worked for an international company and spoke English well. As a child, he had known his Aunt Rosa from holiday gatherings, and he'd met his cousin, Gabriela.

Beth explained as well as she could and then asked for his e-mail address. She told him she'd write a letter and have the children translate it into Spanish so the family could read it and talk about how they might help. The nephew assured her they'd find a way to take care of all family members.

Arnie was on his phone, too. Not able to find a Facebook page or twitter account or personal phone number for Walter Flores besides the accounts held by his vineyard and winery, Arnie had called the Viñedo Cuenca Callada business office and explained that he represented a relative who needed to get in touch with Señor Flores. They gave him an e-mail address but said they weren't permitted to give anyone his cell phone number.

“We'd best get busy composing a letter,” Beth said. “We can use versions of it to e-mail both Rosa's folks and your father.”

It was easier to write the letter for Rosa's family. They knew where she was and had even sent and received letters over the years. She had told none of them that the twins had survived and were living with her, though. That took some special wording, and Beth let each of them add a sentence or two about their own lives.

At the end of the letter to Walter, Lucas and Lucia each added a paragraph to tell their father how they felt about discovering that he really wanted them. It

was past dinner time when Arnie copied and pasted the two letters into separate e-mails, one to Aunt Alicia's son and the other to Walter Flores. Beth noticed that everyone but Rosa and Psycho Cat, reclining on the back of the sofa, looked as if the ring of a phone or a knock on the door would make them crawl under a bed for a day or two. She felt the same.

"Shall we order a pizza so nobody has to cook this evening?" she asked the group.

"Si," Rosa said with a quick smile, looking happy about no longer being governed by her husband's home-cooking-only rule.

Arnie and Lucas agreed, but morose-looking Lucia answered in a weak voice. "I'm not very hungry."

While Arnie ordered the pizza, Beth took Lucia out onto the balcony with a glass of lemonade and the excuse that they'd watch to see how fast the pizza would be delivered to the front door. "How're you feeling?" Beth asked, "Aren't you excited to hear from your father?"

"I'm nervous. Scared, I guess."

"Scared that he won't want you?"

"A little. But I'm just as scared that he'll take us but not really want us. Or, he'll think he wants us but won't like us after we're there. I've never lived anywhere else but here. I won't know how to act."

Beth put her arm around the girl's slim shoulders. "It took us about a second to love you. Your father won't be able to help himself. From the description your mother wrote in her diaries, Walter Flores has a huge heart and would do anything for his family."

"He could have changed. He could have a new family."

Beth knew Lucia had good reason to worry. Her grandfather had provided the perfect prototype of how a domineering, heavy-handed man could act toward his own family members. Lucas tried to copy that role model. Lucia's exposure to Arnie, the best example of

affectionate and understanding manhood Beth knew, had been short and not yet proven to be lasting.

“You and Lucas will have each other, no matter where you go,” Beth said. “There are some people who don’t have anyone. I might know someone who would be able to advise you. Her situation is different. She’s an adult with a family of her own, now. But she had to adjust to a new country when she moved here. I’ll see if I can introduce you and let you ask her how she did it. Okay?”

Beth could feel Lucia’s shaky intake of breath before she looked up at Beth with misty eyes and said softly, “Okay.”



## CHAPTER 34

### **PAPA**

“I got a call that Wyatt and Missy made it home with no problems and are getting prepared for the new school year,” Beth told Lucas and Lucia as they sat on the balcony eating pizza.

“We know. They e-mailed us as soon as they got off the plane,” Lucas said. He glanced at his sister with a half grin as he continued in a teasing tone. “Lucia deleted her message from Wyatt before I could see it. But Missy told us all about the plane ride. And in his e-mail to me, Wyatt wrote that he’ll tell us all about his school this year.”

“Well, I’ll be. I guess I need to get on their e-mail list. You heard from them before we got a phone call. You’ll have lots more exciting things to write about this year than I will, though.”

After two medium pizzas, the rest of Beth’s homemade lemonade, and large servings of rocky road ice cream had vanquished everyone’s hunger, Lucas asked, “Do you think Señor Flores will answer his e-mail tonight?”

Arnie went to the laptop and looked up a time zone chart. “Chile’s in the Atlantic Time Zone. It’s two hours later there, if that country changes to daylight savings during the summer. No. It’s winter there. It could be

only one hour later, which would make it about eight o'clock. We don't have any way of knowing what time of day he checks his e-mail."

"Did the person who answered your phone call tell you whether Walter would be expecting a message?" Beth asked.

"No. She was reluctant to give me the address until I told her it was a family matter I had to discuss with him only."

Rosa rolled through the balcony door to join the group inside. She had been quiet during dinner, only answering direct questions, giving most of her attention to the napping cat rather than to the conversation. When the subject changed to the children's father, Rosa became alert. "What kind of message do you talk about?" she asked.

"One from Walter Flores," Lucia told her. "Our father might send us an e-mail message."

Rosa appeared stunned, as if she had been paying no attention the whole afternoon and had no idea they had contacted Walter. She lowered her head. "I am so sorry, Lucia, Lucas. Eduardo wrote to Walter that you died. It was wrong. Wrong of both of us. I am selfish to obey Eduardo and keep you." She wiped her eyes with a hand. "Your father doesn't know you are here with us."

Lucas rushed to put an arm around her neck. "Don't cry, Abuela. It wasn't your fault."

Lucia watched but didn't move to comfort her grandmother. Beth could imagine the wheels turning in the youngster's brain. Moral decisions can be tough. Should a person do what they know is right even though it contradicts orders from a designated "superior"? Rosa knew the answer. It had been self-serving to deny the children their father to save herself from loneliness, even to escape who knows what kind of hellish punishment her husband might have meted out. Beth hoped Lucia would be able to forgive her

grandmother and to grow into a stronger person than that.

When the land-line phone rang, Beth answered with her thoughts still in turmoil. A male voice with an accent responded to her “hello,” and her eyes grew wide. She’d had no idea Arnie had given Walter their home phone number in his e-mail. For several minutes she verified the information they’d included in the letter, and she gave a short explanation about how she and Arnie knew the twins and their grandmother. When the polite, yet skeptical-sounding man asked to speak to Rosa, Beth turned to Arnie with a grimace. They had written only a sketchy explanation of Rosa’s mental condition.

“Okay, give me a minute,” Beth told him. She put her hand over the mouthpiece and called into the living room. “Rosa, I know you remember Walter Flores. Do you feel up to talking to him?”

“Walter? Yes. I want to talk to him. I want to tell him about his children.”

Beth turned toward the kitchen counter in order to speak into the phone without Rosa hearing. Arnie sat looking as though he was letting this drama unfold without his help but would be ready to step in any time. The kids’ faces were excited, terrified, and impatient all at the same time.

“Mr. Flores—I mean Señor Flores—as we explained, your mother-in-law may have some trouble communicating because of some mental confusion, but she wants to speak to you. I’m passing the phone to her now.” She walked into the living room and handed the phone to Rosa.

Something about talking to a young man she’d known most of his life must have stimulated Rosa’s lazy brain synapses, because her side of the conversation sounded reasonable. She talked about Gabriela’s cancer and the directive to take the children to Walter after he finished school. She told him that

the children were advanced in the school courses they were taking online, and her face showed pride when she bragged about their intelligence, athletic skills, and beauty. Only when talking about her departed husband did she get confused and talk about him in the present tense.

Rather than handing the phone back to Beth, Rosa held it out to Lucas, "Your papa wants to talk to you."

Lucas looked at his sister as he reached for the phone. She nodded with bright eyes and tight lips. Lucas sounded like a little boy when he said hello, but as he answered questions, his voice strengthened, and after a while he started speaking in Spanish. Lucia stood clasping her hands. By the time Lucas handed the phone to her, her eyes were shining and her smile beaming.

"Are you my papa?" she gushed. "Until I read my mother's diary, I always thought you were dead or didn't want us!"

Her outburst must have caused Walter to break down a bit, because after a few seconds, Lucia held the phone away from her ear for a moment to look at it. Then, she heard a voice and plopped cross-legged on the floor to talk. Her conversation swiveled from English to Spanish and back and sometimes lapsed into a combination of the two.

For no apparent reason, Psycho Cat jumped off the sofa, plopped into the middle of Lucia's legs, and head-bumped the phone. "Sylvester, go away, I'm talking to my papa," Lucia said.

Beth rushed forward to retrieve the cat, but he took off for the bedroom hallway, and, when she tried to turn at the last minute, she tripped on the edge of her prized blue and beige area rug. She missed falling into Lucia and instead plopped sideways over the ottoman and onto Arnie's cushy easy chair. Lucia giggled and then tried to explain to her father. Everyone stifled laughs at Beth's expense. She pulled a face and felt a

lighter mood skip through the room, touch each occupant, and loosen the tight nerves. Good ol' Psycho Cat.

When Lucia handed the phone back to Beth, she was ready to ask Walter when he would be coming to get his children, but he didn't give her a chance. He told her he had remarried a year earlier and needed to talk to his wife before he made any plans.

"She was a teacher in a village near here," he said, "and she loves children. We want to have some of our own. It is better if I discuss this big change with her before I make plans, though."

"My goodness, yes," Beth said. "You can't just tell her you're going to fly up here tomorrow and bring home your two children you just found out about."

"Will you take pictures of the children and send them by e-mail?"

"Of course."

Walter started asking about the twins' passports and records, and Beth told him he needed to talk to her husband who had been helping the family with all their financial records and had looked through all the files. She handed the phone to Arnie with a short explanation. Arnie took the phone into the kitchen to conduct the business end of what must be an incredibly emotional undertaking for the successful entrepreneur.

"Your father has some things to take care of before he can make plans to see you," Beth said. "He'll call again tomorrow and let all of us know what he finds out. Don't worry, Arnie and I will be here to help."

Lucia went behind the wheelchair. "Thank you for everything, Mrs. Stockwell, and thank Mr. Stockwell, too."

"Hold on a minute. Let me take a picture of each of you to send to your father. You've seen him on the website, and he'd like to see you."

After Beth took individual pictures and a picture of the twins with their grandmother, Lucas walked up to her with his hand out, but Beth held out her arms, and he hugged her around the waist with a tight squeeze. Lucia pushed the wheelchair to the door and stopped to hug her, too. Rosa smiled. Perhaps she was feeling happy that the babies she had raised had turned out to be warm, affectionate young people.

“That’s all the thanks I need,” Beth said.

At ten o’clock that evening, Beth and Arnie sat on their balcony with the lights of Brookside and the city beyond creating a soft shimmer against the dark sky. Beth felt cozy in the mild evening. Psycho Cat sat on his haunches on the inside of the door pawing at insects that landed on the screen. Beth and Arnie had learned early on not to allow the cat out on the balcony, because he jumped on the wide handrail. They figured that even a cat would have a hard time landing on its feet after a ten story fall. The cat accepted his confinement in silence and shared the outdoor experience through the screen.

“I’m going to watch Fabienne tomorrow morning,” Beth said. “But I’ll be here in case Walter calls and we need to visit with the twins. Whose number did you ask him to call when he’s made his plans?”

“I told him the twins don’t have their own phones and Rosa may or may not remember what’s going on if he calls her. He has both numbers, though, and my e-mail address.”

“Rosa’s nephew has the same numbers and e-mail address. I hope we hear from him tomorrow, too. There’s something else we have to take care of as soon as we know for sure that Rosa and the kids will have somewhere to go. But I haven’t figured out yet exactly how to do it.”

“What’s that?”

“I have to tell someone that Rosa is the one who picked the locks in the building. We can tell Rosa she has to pay to get the doors fixed. I hope that’ll be enough to keep her from being charged. Do you think I should run the idea by Al? He seems to like Rosa and the kids. Or the police, or...?”

“You should really tell the building manager.”

“I know, but... Ms. Helper? Yikes. She’d probably press charges and demand that Rosa go to jail for ten years. Maybe I could talk to some of the residents and ask them what they would do.”

“That’s an idea. But like you said, first things first. Let’s hope Rosa’s relatives come through for her. I have golf tomorrow morning, but I’ll skip the lunch. You’ll be okay handling it if someone calls before I get back, right?”

“I hope so.”



## CHAPTER 35 INTRODUCTIONS

At five after nine the next morning, H el ene arrived with Fabienne, her diaper bag, a sack of toys, and so many exclamations of thanks that Beth had to cut her off and send her on her way. Beth took the little girl by the hand and suggested things they could do—play with the toys, help make the bed, read books. Fabienne put a thumb in her mouth and looked pouty about her mother leaving. Then, she spied Psycho Cat slinking in from Beth’s bedroom.

“Vesther!” She broke away from Beth, and raced toward the cat.

Psycho Cat was having none of it. He raced across the room and hid beneath Arnie’s easy chair, Fabienne on his tail. When the toddler lay on her stomach and reached under, the cat streaked out the other side and behind the sofa. The two played the chase game for several minutes until Fabienne fell and started wailing. Psycho Cat rubbed around Beth’s legs while she sat on the couch holding and soothing the weepy child.

“Look at Sylvester, Fabienne. He’s sorry you fell. Maybe if we read a book, he’ll jump up beside you so you can pet him—*gently*, remember.”

The plan worked. The book was read and Fabienne established on the rug with her toys, Beth sitting

cross-legged across from her, and Psycho Cat watching from the back of the sofa, when the phone rang. Beth felt her insides quiver.

“Sure enough, it was Walter Flores. Beth wasn’t sure what she expected—that he would be flying to Kansas City later that afternoon to retrieve his kids, maybe? Instead, he said he’d told his wife all about the kids and checked with the Ramos family to verify that Eduardo had died and Rosa still lived in Kansas City. He checked with Rosa’s family, too, and had been assured that they’d been just as surprised to learn the children were living with Rosa. Beth did a mental and emotional step backward. Of course, she shouldn’t have expected the man to take their word for this bizarre turn of events without some kind of check.

“Mrs. Stockwell,” Walter said.

“Beth. Please call me Beth.”

“Thank you. Beth, do you have means for the children and their grandmother to participate in a video call? My wife and I would like to talk to them face-to-face.”

“Yes. As a matter-of-fact, we make video calls to my daughter and her family in Oregon. I can bring Lucia and Lucas over here where the program is installed on our laptop.” They exchanged user names and Beth said she’d go get the children.

“Bring Rosa, too, please,” Walter said before they hung up. “We need to speak to all of them.”

Beth called the penthouse and explained. She wished she could tell the kids that their father had decided to take them to Chile to live with him, but he hadn’t said so. In fact, he’d sounded—what. Methodical, business-like? So now? Just another phone call, as far as she could tell, one that might disappoint the children.

“We’re going to have visitors,” she said to Fabienne after the phone call.

“Uncle Exeye.” Fabienne said with her dimpled smile.

“No, not Alexei this time. But you’ve met Lucia and Lucas at the pool. Do you remember?”

Fabienne looked toward the balcony doors, as if she might spy the pool, and then turned back to her blocks, unconcerned. Beth was glad Rosa and the kids didn’t know that Fabienne was the daughter of Viktor Lutsenko. In that case, her presence would make this video session distressing, especially since it looked as if Viktor might be guilty. There was no telling how all this would work out. Three children still without fathers to help raise them? At least, Rosa’s nephew had given the twins hope of a place to live.

Rosa seemed to be in her element with a cat and a toddler to stroke and coo over. Fabienne took to the woman in a blink of the cat’s eye after she satisfied her curiosity about the chair on wheels. Lucia and Lucas had both crouched to say hello to the little one when they came in, but they were too curious about the impending talk with their father to spend much time with her.

At the kitchen island, Beth set up the program on the laptop and let the twins sit on side-by-side bar stools so they would both be within the computer’s camera angle. Walter Flores, looking a little older than he did in the photo they’d seen on his vineyard’s website, appeared on the screen in only a few seconds. Over five thousand miles in fifteen seconds. If no one else thought it extraordinary, Beth was astounded enough for all of them.

First came the introductions. Beth stuck her head into the camera’s view for a minute to introduce herself and then stepped aside to listen. Not watching, she caught a foot on a stool leg and tripped. The kids looked to see if she was okay, and she waved them back to the screen, grateful that her clumsiness had been out of camera range.

Walter's wife, introduced as Maria, wore her dark hair shoulder length and had a delicate, rosy, light-skinned complexion that contrasted with but, also, complemented Walter's swarthy, black-haired, square-jawed appearance. She commented on Lucia's beauty and then gasped and put her hand to her mouth. She said something in Spanish that made Walter bend toward the camera and smile.

"What did she say?" Beth asked in a low voice.

"She said Lucas looks like a picture she saw of our father as a child," Lucia said.

"Is that your abuela I see in the background?" Walter asked in English.

"Si," Lucas said and bent to the side so his father could see Rosa in her chair with Psycho Cat on her lap and Fabienne holding onto her knee. "Abuela must use a wheelchair most of the time, because our abuelo pushed..."

With a squint of disapproval and a knee bump for her brother, Lucia interrupted him. "Her back was broken, and now she has trouble standing and walking."

Walter's and Maria's eyes widened. Beth did a double-take and gave Eduardo Ramos another demerit, a huge one. There was a silence. Then, Walter wanted to know who the baby was, and Lucia told him that Mrs. Stockwell was babysitting for a neighbor's child. He and Maria glanced at each other for a brief moment as if in relief. Beth started finding this whole business of Walter's caution in accepting his children's story to be irksome. On the other hand, it made sense that it would be hard for him to accept that he had totally fallen for the lies Mr. Ramos told him ten years earlier.

Walter asked Lucia and Lucas about how they got their schooling, what they liked to do, where they had travelled—the answers seemed to shock Maria more than Walter—and what kind of books they liked to

read—Maria smiled at how many varieties and titles they rattled off. Beth pushed Rosa closer so she could talk, but Walter and Maria soon understood that she couldn't focus and wanted to get back to her little friends. Before he let Rosa go, Walter took Maria's hand and held it so the children could see they were united.

“Maria and I,” Walter said, “would like for you, my children, to come to live with us. Rosa, we want you to come, too. After all of these years, you are the only mother my children have known. We have plenty of room, and you can have your own full-time nurse. My mother lives close by in one of our casitas. She'll love having a friend of her own age on the estate. Does this sound good?”

All the children could do was nod. Their faces were serious and their eyes wide as if all kinds of thoughts were going through their minds.

Finally, Lucia looked at Beth and said in a small voice, “How will we get to Chile?”

Walter chuckled. “Don't worry at all about that, my princesita. We will fly to you and bring you home. All you need to do is pack your favorite clothes and keepsakes. Maybe Mrs. Stockwell will help you buy a suitcase or two, or boxes will work.”

“We'll go tomorrow and buy suitcases if we don't find any in the condo,” Beth said.

“Do you enjoy fine red wines, Beth?” Walter asked.

“I enjoy robust red wine, but we don't usually buy very fine wine,” Beth said.

“We will bring you cases of our Malbec and Cabernet grand reserves. I think you will like them.”

“Oh, no need...”

“After I make arrangements, I will call you again to let you know when to expect us. It will take a few days.” He smiled at Maria. “Maria wants to arrange special bedrooms for each of you. And Mrs. Stockwell, Beth, I'll have my lawyer contact your husband to

learn what he found out about the property and investments. I'm sorry I missed him today, but I'll talk with him again soon."

The business-like speech at an end, Walter turned all mushy as he said farewell to his kids and promised he'd call Rosa's phone to talk to them several times before he arrived.

The twins were silent as they walked to either side of their grandmother. They stood watching Fabienne pet Psycho Cat and Rosa pet the cat and the child's head at the same time. Neither Lucia nor Lucas seemed to know what else to do. Beth offered coffee to Rosa and orange soda left over from her grandchildren's visit to the kids. They all accepted.

"Fabienne loves to build castles and towers with her building blocks," Beth said. "Why don't you help her build something grand while you drink your sodas?"

The kids became relaxed and laughing as Fabienne knocked over one block tower after another, when the doorbell rang. Beth glanced at the time, eleven ten. She knew who it had to be, and her mind raced. This might be H el ene's chance to talk to Rosa. She invited H el ene into the living room and introduced her as if all was normal—no murder victim's family, no suspect's family.

When Beth said the name Rosa Ramos, however, H el ene's polite smile faded, and she stared, first at Rosa and then at Lucia and finally Lucas as the two children were introduced. Rosa's face didn't lose its serene smile at the name Lutsenko, but Lucia frowned, and Lucas jerked to attention. In the process, he knocked over the tower he had built.

Fabienne giggled and said, "Luka, that's silly--now we have to build it again," in an uncanny mimic of the pretend lecture he'd been giving each time she knocked over the blocks. No response. Neither twin so much as looked at the fallen blocks or at Fabienne.

“Luka and Lusa want to play Mama,” Fabienne said as she lay on her back and pouted in outrage as if the interruption of her mother’s arrival had taken her friends’ attention away from their game.

But, instead of her usual quick response to her daughter’s dismay, H el ene turned to Rosa. “This may not be the best time or place, but I need to speak to you, Se nora Ramos.” She looked at Beth. “Perhaps we can talk on the patio.” It was not a question.

Beth nodded. “Of course. Lucas and Lucia, please watch Fabienne for a few minutes. We’ll be right outside.”

“I will go with Abuela,” Lucas said, standing and moving toward the balcony door.

“She’ll be okay,” Beth said. “I’ll be there with her. You’ll be able to see us through the glass.”

“No,” Lucas insisted. “I need to be with her. Lucia, too. We know everything she knows about our grandfather’s fall. You want us with you, don’t you Abuela?”

Rosa looked lost, but she nodded and smiled in response to the question and said, “Si, I want the children with me.”



## CHAPTER 36 CONFESSIONS

**P**sycho Cat jumped off Rosa's lap and pawed over to Fabienne who now lay on her stomach, the side of her head on the rug, fingering a block with a sulky look on her face. Beth caught the cat's movement out of the corner of her eye and watched him approach the quiet child, sit beside the little girl, and rest his head on her neck.

Fabienne giggled. "Vesther, your whiskers tickle, like Papa's." She became serious again. "Papa can't come home, but he 'till loves me."

Psycho Cat's purr sounded as loud as a tractor motor in the seconds of quiet that followed, but then Rosa leaned forward in her chair. "Where is your papa, *mi pequeña*, my little one?"

Hélène's mouth popped open, she gazed for a second at Rosa with a mixture of anger and disbelief, and she spoke with controlled hostility. "He's locked up, Señora, accused by you of pushing your husband to his death. Don't pretend you don't know that."

Rosa, clear-eyed, sat straight and faced Hélène. "Fabienne's papa couldn't have pushed Eduardo off the balcony. Because I did," she said with assurance. "In self-defense."

“No!” Lucas shouted and strode to his grandmother’s side. “I did it.”

Beth wouldn’t know who might confess next, because Arnie burst through the door with a cheerful, “Well, hello, hello. Guess I’ve been missing out on the party.”

They all turned toward the doorway. Each face wore a different expression. Arnie scanned from one to the next. Beth opened her mouth, but all that came out was “uh,” and then, unable to formulate an explanation, she shook her head. She was busy processing.

After no one else spoke, Arnie lugged his golf bag into the entry and turned toward the living room. His gaze lit on Lucia. Her cheeks resembled a patio water display.

“Lucia,” Arnie said, “what happened?” When no explanation ensued, he tried again. “If your father and his new wife told you they won’t take you to live with them, you don’t have to worry. You’ve been promised a good home with your grandmother’s family.”

Lucia sniffed. “Our Papa did want all of us, but when he finds out about...” She gestured toward Rosa and Lucas, and an increased volume of tears prevented more speech.

“Finds out about *what?*” Arnie said. “I’m lost here.” He looked at H el ene whose tears ran almost as hard as Lucia’s. She smiled and put her hands over her heart. “I knew Viktor was innocent,” she said.

Now, it was Arnie’s turn to look amazed. He switched his focus to Lucas, a bulldog who could have scared away the most determined trespasser. The boy stood close beside Rosa with a hand on the back of her wheelchair. The only difference in Rosa’s normal, serene demeanor appeared as a deepened line between her eyebrows as if she was deep in thought or maybe trying to get her thoughts straight.

At the sound of her mother's weepy voice, Fabienne had rolled over. She sat up. Psycho Cat meowed at the disruption and placed a protective paw on her lap.

"Why you cry, Mama?" Fabienne asked.

Hélène bent toward her daughter. "I'm crying because I am so happy, ma petite. We will get your papa back."

"Beth, do you want to let your husband in on this? I take it someone found out that Viktor is innocent. But why is that causing Lucia to..." He looked sideways and then turned to study Rosa and Lucas when Beth nodded toward them.

"Maybe you can help sort this out," Beth said. "Both Rosa and Lucas claim they pushed Eduardo off the balcony. Maybe Rosa confessed just to help Fabienne get her daddy back. Or, could be she's protecting Lucas. Lucas could have confessed to protect his grandmother." She frowned at the two.

"Rosa," Arnie said, "you couldn't have pushed your husband over a wall from your wheelchair. And Lucas, you are a strong young man, but do you expect us to believe you could toss a grown man from your balcony?"

"My grandfather used to hit all of us," Lucia said, wiping the tears from her cheeks with her hand. "We wanted to strike back, but we were afraid. I didn't see what happened that day. I didn't know about Abuelo falling until I found Abuela and Lucas on the balcony. They said nothing about a Russian until later, when the police asked us questions." She gazed at the little girl on the floor nearby. "You have to tell the truth, Lucas."

Beth caught Lucas's eye. "If it was self-defense, there won't be a murder charge."

Rosa also turned to Lucas and nodded. "Honesty. Yes. The truth. Do not be like your abuelo, Lucas. He lied and forced all of us to lie to keep you hidden. Look what pain that caused. Whatever it is, lies will make it

worse and hurt you and the one you are lying for. I know.”

Ironic, Beth thought, that Rosa, perpetuator of a lie for years, was telling Lucas not to lie. The confused woman didn't seem to remember that she needed to explain her confession. Beth waited. They *all* waited to find out what Lucas would say.

“But Abuela...” Lucas started.

“Tell the truth.” It was an order.

Lucas looked at each person in the room, took a deep breath, and blew it out. “It was an accident. Abuela was defending herself, and she didn't know she could push Abuelo so hard.” He put his hand on Rosa's shoulder. “It made your back hurt for days, didn't it Abuela?”

Rosa patted the hand on her shoulder with a contented countenance. “The pain gets worse when I stand.”

“There was a man with a Russian accent there earlier. He and Abuelo argued about money. I didn't see him, only heard him, because Abuelo didn't let him in. But Abuelo came storming into the workroom with papers in his hand—the threatening letter. He threw it at Abuela and yelled, ‘This is what comes of giving charity.’ Abuela read it, and I read over her shoulder. Then, she folded it and put it into the pocket on her wheelchair.” Lucas hung his head. “I don't know if the man was Fabienne's papa, but I thought it could be since I knew Abuelo gave him money.”

“My husband was home with us all morning,” H el ene said. “It couldn't have been him. But now he's in jail.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Finish your story, Lucas,” Arnie said. “We'll deal with the incriminations later.”

“Later that morning, Lucia and I were in the workroom at our computers, but I pretended to go to

the bathroom and hid behind a chair in the living room to listen, like I did whenever I had the chance.”

Beth glanced at Lucia whose delicate eyebrows were puckered. No more tears, now a rather sharp visage made the girl look older than her tender eleven years.

Lucas saw his sister’s scowl, too, and took another breath before he continued. “I heard Abuelo shouting at Abuela about knowing her place and not having a say about where we would live. I think they were arguing again about moving back to Peru since Abuelo had retired from his job. Abuela said she knew his work visa expired and that he had taken the whole pension and deposited it in the bank. If they went home, she said, they could live in comfort, and they had friends and family they could help. Abuela was more—well, she was not so—so—confused before Abuelo died.” Lucas glanced at his grandmother.

“Then, Abuelo yelled at her to shut up, and Abuela shouted back at him. I peeked through the doorway, because she never, ever did that, but this time... Abuelo was standing on a stool, watering his hanging plants, the ones that reminded him of Peru, and he struck out with his foot. He was wearing a hard-soled shoe. He would have kicked her in the face or in the chest and could have killed her. I ran out to pull Abuela’s chair away, but before I got there, Abuela caught his foot, stood up, and pushed him away. The stool tipped and he—he—disappeared over the rail.”

Rosa sat with her head turned toward Lucas, nodding at each of his assertions.

“But then, when the police came,” H el ene said, “why didn’t you tell this to them? It was self-defense.”

“I didn’t *know* what they would do,” Lucas said. “They could have taken her away from us. When Lucia saw the body and screamed, I panicked. I told Abuela to say she’d heard a man with a Russian accent come to the door and had gone to the work room to watch television so they could talk. I wrote it out so she

wouldn't forget. It was later, after the investigators figured out that Abuelo had been pushed that we dug out the letter Abuelo gave her to read the morning before he died. I thought it would help to give the police a suspect to look for."

"You said that letter was unsigned," H el ene said. "The one the police found has Viktor's signature."

Rosa spoke up. "I learned many skills when I worked as a private detective's assistant. Skills used by criminals we sometimes employed to catch criminals. I can pick any lock, and I can forge a signature."

"Abuela said the letter would be worth more if it was signed and had fingerprints." Lucas said.

"So I picked the lock on your door, Madame Lutsenka," Rosa said. "I knew Eduardo gave money to your husband every month, and I thought he must have written the letter when Eduardo withdrew the payments. At a desk, I found a receipt with your husband's signature on it and an empty envelope. It was easy to forge the signature at the bottom of the letter and put the letter into the envelope that had his fingerprints. I wore gloves to pick the lock. The receipt? I burned it in the kitchen sink."

"When did you break in, Abuela?" Lucia asked. "Lucas took your remote key away so you couldn't sneak out."

Rosa looked rather contrite. "I left the door blocked open one day when you and Lucas were at the pool with those children."

"With Wyatt and Missy and Alana?" Beth rolled her eyes.

H el ene called Viktor's attorney, Beth called Detective Rinquire, and Arnie searched the refrigerator for lunch fixings. It promised to be a long afternoon.

The best result of Rosa's confession was that Richard Montorlee worked fast so that Viktor came

home the very next afternoon. Beth stayed away from the homecoming. She didn't want to interfere with an emotional reunion.

The worst consequence was the need to phone Walter Flores to tell him Lucas and his grandmother would have to wait until a judge released them to leave Kansas City, and who knew how long that would take. Beth let Arnie do the calling. When he learned the whole story, though, Walter flew up the very next day to give his support. His English proved to be excellent, most likely because of his stint on the cruise ships, and his obvious love for his newly discovered children plus his knowledge of Chilean law impressed a judge. Richard Montorlee, who had been hired by Walter, had arranged for a quick hearing.

Arnie and Beth went to Rosa's court hearing to testify. Beth explained that Rosa didn't understand what she was doing when she had pilfered small items from condos in her building. She exhibited a couple of the works Rosa had made from the items she "found." The stern judge talked to Rosa and Lucas and discovered that, since her confession, Rosa no longer had a clear memory of her husband's death and spoke about him in the present tense. With a gentle bang of his gavel, the judge announced that he would dismiss both cases if she paid for damage to the doors, signed a letter of explanation and an apology to the condo residents, and left the country under the care of someone responsible.

The children and their grandmother were remitted to Walter's custody. Walter made sure Rosa signed a check to the condo association to pay for the door repairs and sent out the apology. There was one person who objected to letting Rosa get off with only a settlement. Herman Houser wanted his grooming items returned. Beth took Rosa to visit him and offer the collage that held his comb and nail file. After talking to Rosa for a bit, the man accepted. Then, he

became so mesmerized by the artwork that he asked to see some of her other works.

The only thing left to do was to hire someone to sell the penthouse property and close Eduardo's bank accounts and investments. After learning more about how Arnie had helped the family, Walter offered him a generous sum to become Rosa's power of attorney and supervise the selling of the property while he returned to Chile with his newly discovered family.



## CHAPTER 37

### **GENEROUS OFFER/MORE SUSPICIONS**

“Did you know,” Beth said at dinner the evening after Arnie told her what he’d been asked to do, “Viktor’s company rehired him? They gave his job to someone else while he was in prison, but their sales sank. Anyway, now Viktor will start earning again. But those kids are way in debt--to us, even though I told them they didn’t have to pay, to Mr. Montorlee, and maybe to other creditors.

“And...?”

“And Hélène has decided to go ahead and take the chef job at Aixois. Her sister is coming to take classes and be an au pair for Fabienne.”

“So...”

“So, that one-bedroom condo won’t be big enough. It was already getting too small since Fabienne is growing out of her crib. I was thinking, having power of attorney and your fair share of their respect, you might suggest to Walter that before you sell the penthouse he let Viktor and Hélène live there for a few months until they can pay off their debts and save for a deposit on another rental.”

“That’s a brilliant idea. Walter told me how bad Lucas feels about Viktor being kept in jail. The kid didn’t consider the consequences of his deception, and

poor Rosa might have been too confused to think beyond using her detective skills to get the signature.”

“Burglar skills.”

“Right. But the whole family will feel good about being able to help the Lutsenkos. Walter’s a good man. He’ll go for it, I’m pretty sure.”

“Viktor seems to be a good man, too,” Beth mused. “Do you think he wrote that letter to Mr. Ramos?”

“Lucas said the Russian-accented man came *early* that morning. According to H el ene, Viktor didn’t leave their condo until late that morning, just before Eduardo fell.”

Beth nodded. She remembered that, too, and H el ene had said the same thing all along, before she knew the letter came earlier. Beth set her fork on her plate. Arnie’s grilled salmon, her green bean almandine, and a cabbage salad paired with one of Walter’s dark red, spicy, fruity Malbecs, tasted spectacular, especially while they sat on their balcony in the evening breeze. But she couldn’t touch the last few bites as she pondered who might still have reason to carry through on the letter’s threat.

When Arnie had finished eating and leaned back to enjoy the last of his wine, she said, “I saw Alexei waiting at the elevator when I returned from the grocery store this afternoon. He could be taking Viktor’s money for his cause again. I know H el ene is convinced Alexei was using it to help Viktor’s extended family. But what if he wrote that letter? He could be threatening Viktor to extort money, too.”

“The guy impressed me as being a little underhanded.”

“Psycho Cat doesn’t like him, either.”

“Well, there you go. I’m not sure Sylvester is the psycho one around here.” Arnie gave Beth a sideways grin. “Anyway, at least you could remind H el ene that she should report threats or blackmail to the law.”

Arnie called Walter that very evening, and he and Beth met with him to suggest that he offer the condo to the Lutsenkos, at least while it was being put on the market. Walter took his new family aside and then returned with the generous proposition that he not only let them live in the penthouse for six months, but also that the Ramos funds would pay for the lawyer and their back rent so they could get a good start on saving for a larger home.

“I’m very sorry we caused Mr. Lutsenkos to be sent to prison,” Lucas said. “I hope this helps make up for it and that they’ll forgive Abuela and me.”

“I think they’ve forgiven you,” Beth said. “And this will help make up for your mistake. I’m glad you’re learning something your grandfather didn’t teach you—that lies and deception cause pain. Would you like for me to tell my renters about your generous offer? I could arrange a time when they can see the penthouse and sign a lease if everyone agrees on the terms.”

Lucas nodded, and Lucia said. “Bring little Fabienne, too, so we can say good-bye.”

“Yes, please arrange a meeting,” Walter said. “We’ll be here all day tomorrow and won’t be leaving until the following morning. We still have some packing to do. We heard from Rosa’s family, and she asked to go to Peru. To go home, she said. We’ll stop there on our way to Chile. She’ll stay with her sister for a month while Lucas and Lucia learn to know Maria and their new home.”

“The vineyard is near mountains,” Lucas said with excitement in his eyes, “and not far from the Pacific Ocean.”

“Papa has horses,” Lucia added, “and people come there to stay in a hotel and eat in the restaurant and play tennis and ride horses and swim and—lots of stuff.”

Walter chuckled. “And buy our wines.”

Beth and Arnie were half-way down the hall to their condo when Beth heard the elevator stop and looked back to see who could be coming to the tenth floor. She wasn't expecting anyone, and surely the Flores family wasn't. She saw Alexei step out followed by a blond, burly man wearing black clothing. Alexei saw her, motioned his companion back in, and closed the doors. A shiver ran up Beth's spine. She grabbed Arnie's arm and pointed at the elevator.

"I just saw Alexei start to get off the elevator with a guy that looked like a thug," she said. "We need to follow them and find out what they're up to."

"Are you kidding? What're we going to do if we find them? Accuse them of taking the elevator to the tenth floor?"

"We'll ask why they came up here."

"They wouldn't be likely to give us a straight answer if we did find them, but we can warn Walter that the men could be after the kids' money. Alexei may think Rosa and the twins are there alone."

"If he wants to threaten them, he's got to be stopped. No telling how many immigrants he and his friends are targeting."

Arnie headed back to the penthouse, and Beth followed. They spoke to Walter alone and shared their suspicions. The man's face hardened.

"I was approached two days ago," Walter said, "by a man who said Eduardo owed money he had promised for their cause. I told them there was nothing in Eduardo's records about such a debt, and the money now belonged to his widow and grandchildren. He left but vowed to return with what he called *incentive*. It sounded like a threat, but I didn't give it much more thought after he didn't reappear for a day."

Together, the three devised a plan.

Beth called H el ene and arranged to meet her and Fabienne for a walk on the Trolley Track Trail the next

morning. H el ene accepted saying she wanted to share good news about her job.

“I want to be there early,” Beth told her, “before Viktor leaves for work. I need to talk to both of you.”

“If it’s about the rent...”

“Well, partly. Don’t worry about that part. I’ll explain the whole thing tomorrow morning.” Seventy-three. Beth hoped Psycho Cat would be ready for his constitutional that early.



## CHAPTER 38

### HEROICS

“So what do you think of the offer? It would make Lucas and Lucia very proud to be able to help you and help them feel better about the trouble Rosa caused.” Beth had decided to share the good news first and had brought Arnie along so he could help explain the legal aspects of renting the penthouse for a dollar a month and a dollar deposit.

“The payment insures a binding lease that protects both you and Walter. It holds you responsible for any damage to the property, insures he’ll pay for any breakdown of the appliances, and outlines the rules of the agreement,” Arnie said.

“It’ll be similar to the rental agreement you have with me for this condo,” Beth said. “Standard stuff.”

Viktor and H el ene smiled at each other in silent agreement. “It’s a generous offer,” Viktor said. “But the penthouse condo is enough. We will pay our debts.”

“Walter told us to tell you that it’s a package deal,” Beth said. “He can afford to do this, and I think it will help Lucas to start moving on from all of his years under the influence of his grandfather.”

H el ene took Viktor’s hand, and they agreed with a nod, showing the kind of mutual trust without words one finds in people with deep connections.

“Tomorrow, the Flores family and Rosa will leave the country. We need to arrange a time when you can sign the lease.” Beth looked at H el ene. “I’ll take you up to the penthouse after our walk so you can see the layout. Then, if you like it, maybe Viktor can return sometime during the day to sign.”

“There’s another matter we need to discuss,” Arnie said in a business-like, authoritative tone. “And you have to be honest. All of this started because of that poison letter Lucas and Rosa thought you gave to Mr. Ramos.”

After Arnie convinced him with assurances of his safety, Viktor admitted to having been coerced with threats to his family into giving his money and the money he collected from Eduardo to Alexei’s organization, with only small benefit to his family in the Ukraine. After Viktor regained his job, Alexei appeared again to demand part of his earnings. H el ene appeared confused for a few minutes, and then she recounted doubts she’d had during Viktor’s incarceration when Alexei questioned her too closely about the evidence and what Viktor told his attorney.”

“There were also times,” she admitted, “when Alexei made advances to me that felt like more than friendship. But, like a fool, I overlooked it because he was such a help and was good to Fabienne. I wish you’d told me the truth.”

“By not telling, I was trying to protect you and Fabienne,” Viktor said.

“Will you see Alexei today?” Arnie asked.

“We were planning to go—to go to dinner with him. He’s supposed to be here a little after five,” H el ene said with a grimace.

“Keep that dinner date,” Arnie said. He laid out the scheme they’d planned with Walter to end Alexei’s extortion activities. While Arnie talked, a grim-faced H el ene picked up Fabienne and gave her a huge, protective embrace, which Fabienne accepted with glee

and an equally tight squeeze. In the end, Viktor and H  l  ne agreed the benefits of action outweighed a small chance of danger.

At a few minutes past five, Beth peeked through a chink in the fence and picked out two dark, unmarked vehicles parked in the visitor parking area behind the pool area. They had to be police cars. Lucas, Lucia, H  l  ne with Fabienne on her lap, and Arnie sat in patio chairs hidden behind the high wooden fence. Beth joined them.

They were pretending to be having a picnic of crackers, cheese, and fruit, but Beth noticed none of them eating a thing. She could feel her heart in her throat and thought it might be swept down with any food she tried to swallow. Rosa had stayed home to finish bagging her jewelry supplies, and Beth wondered if the woman had any idea of the manipulated events about to take place below her balcony near where her husband had met his grisly end. It would be no picnic.

“I think the police cars are here. Has anything happened yet?” Beth whispered to Arnie. She could see only a sliver at a time of the back lot by turning to look between the fence boards from her seat.

“No.” He swiveled to see through a different spot and held up his hand. “Wait,” he said in a low voice to everyone. “Stay quiet. A car just pulled in from the street and stopped in front of Viktor and Walter.”

H  l  ne stood and peered through an opening. “That’s Alexei’s car.”

Fabienne, freed from the lap, toddled a short distance from the table until she spotted a rubber ball. She picked it up and tossed it a couple of times. H  l  ne was preoccupied with worry and continued watching the events taking place in the parking lot, but Lucia walked over to play with Fabienne.

Beth watched them and decided she could depend on Lucia to keep the little one from falling into the pool. She stood and looked for another spot to watch through the fence. Then, just as she found a good, wide opening between two boards, sirens broke the nervous silence with blasts of sound that reverberated against the tall building. Two police cars screeched in behind Alexei's, and two more blocked the exit at the opposite end of the fenced lot. Police left doors open as they exited their vehicles with guns drawn.

Beth had missed the handing over of the money that clued the police to appear, but now she saw Viktor and Walter take advantage of the surprise, dart behind the nearest parked car, and crouch. Alexei and his hulking companion stuffed bulging envelopes into their pants as they searched for an escape. The ten-foot-tall fence that protected parked cars from balls thrown on the youth camp field behind wasn't an option. Getting Al to buzz open the back door of the building for them wasn't a good probability. In an instant, the men took their chances and sprinted to the pool gate.

Beth gasped, Arnie swore, and, with wild eyes, Hélène looked around for her child. Before she could take a step, Alexei tore through the gate. Beth barely recognized the man with the murderous expression on his face and squint of desperation in his eyes. But Fabienne didn't notice the change.

"Bonjour, 'Exeye," she cooed as she headed toward him.

"Grab her!" shouted the hulk.

Alexei didn't hesitate. He pulled the child to his shoulder with one arm, pulled a gun from his pants with the other, and held the gun to Fabienne's head.

"No!" Lucia screamed.

The big guy ran to the side of the pool toward the gate on the far end, but he stopped short when two uniformed policemen and Detective Rinquire stormed

through yelling at everyone to freeze. Sizing up the situation, Detective Rinquire stepped in front of Lucia and motioned for her to stay put.

“Throw down the gun,” he said in a steady voice. “You don’t want anyone to get hurt. So far, it’s just a matter of a little unarmed action.”

Neither Beth nor Arnie moved a muscle. Beth’s brain couldn’t function enough to look for an out. Her only thought was, why, oh why had they felt confident enough to bring the children to the pool area? Stupid!

Hélène brought her hands together in supplication and croaked, “Alexei, please let her go. She loves you.”

Fabienne, who’d acted so far as if this was some kind of new game they were all playing, gazed at her mother’s face and started wailing. She wiggled to be put down, which forced Alexei to squeeze her harder.

Viktor shouted from outside the open gate where he and Walter had stopped, “*Vidpusty yiyi.*” Beth guessed it must mean “put her down” or “let her go” in Ukrainian, or maybe Russian. Alexei, who still struggled to hold the child while keeping the gun against her head, turned slightly toward the open gate. Fabienne, hearing her father, became frantic to get down. She kicked Alexei and scratched his neck with her tiny, sharp fingernails. Alexei knocked her hand away with his gun, and both Viktor and Hélène begged her to be still for Uncle Alexei. She became a limp rag, leaking tears and snot on her captor’s shoulder.

Arnie had edged his way around the metal lawn table toward Lucia, and Hélène took a step toward her baby each time the child’s voice rose. But Beth had inched toward the end of the pool where Lucas had been perched sideways on a chaise lounge, unnoticed, since Fabienne had wandered away from her mother with Lucia on her heels. Those children had learned a mother-hen instinct from Rosa, Beth decided. But because of it, Lucas was now stranded in the middle of

the fray, behind Alexei but in sight of Burley Man standing across from him on the side of the pool.

The big, tough-looking Ukrainian stood there with his hands up, but when Alexei gained control of his hostage, he saw his chance to lope toward the man who held their only insurance for escape. He pulled a gun from inside his shirt and growled something Beth didn't quite catch, the Russian equivalent of "Let's get out of here," she was sure.

The police directed their weapons toward the man as he ran, but before anyone could yell "stop," Lucas leapt off the chaise, took two steps toward the corner of the pool, and kicked out a foot, as if kicking a soccer ball, at the man's leg closest to the pool. Suddenly off balance, the man toppled into the deep end. He came up sputtering, no gun in his hand.

Beth's instinct was to make a mental note to make sure the gun was retrieved from the bottom of the pool before any children swam in it. She, and everyone else, watched with fascination while the big man tried to swim to the shallow end of the pool. Obviously not a swimmer and bogged down with wet clothing and shoes, the man flapped and yelled until the two cops used the pole of the pool leaf net to drag him out.

While everyone's attention was on the cursing whale, including Alexei's, Fabienne slipped out of her shirt and off Alexei's shoulder to the cement. She scampered around his legs straight to Viktor who rushed toward her. Detective Rinquire took advantage of Alexei's unsuccessful attempt at grabbing the child to rush forward, take hold of Alexei's gun hand, pull his arms back, and cuff him.

All three families gathered in the penthouse that evening for lease-signing, furniture distribution decisions, and a late meal. Restaurants had been suggested as appropriate for a celebration of this magnitude, but when Arnie offered to grill his

signature hamburgers for everyone, they decided to stay in. H el ene must have learned to chop vegetables from a Samurai Swordsman, because she brought up a panful of aromatic ratatouille before Arnie scooped the first burger off the grill. Rosa contributed the desert, some Piononos she'd made for her family. There were plenty of the little cakes to go around and enough left for them to pack and enjoy while waiting for the long flights to Peru and Chile.

Although Walter thought they might have to delay their trip for several days, it turned out that there was a preliminary hearing for the two Ukrainian criminals the very next morning. Walter let his children attend in order to watch and learn from the proceedings.

Viktor testified the longest as he told how Alexei had been threatening him for several months and had taken advantage of Eduardo Ramos's generosity. Beth and Arnie went to the hearing in case they were needed as eye witnesses, but they weren't called to testify. What would she have testified to, Beth wondered—that she hadn't trusted Alexei because Psycho Cat didn't like him?

Detective Rinquire handed the court-appointed attorney a packet of information, and the judge ordered Alexei deported to the custody of a Ukrainian court. To Viktor's and H el ene's relief, the surly Burley Man had been induced to talk by promises of a good word to the Ukrainian courts, and two more Ukrainian separatists were rounded up and sent home.

Viktor set off for work as soon as court was out, but H el ene, Fabienne, Beth, Arnie, and Psycho Cat saw Walter, Lucia, Lucas, and Rosa off as they boarded the airport shuttle. The hugs, thanks, good wishes, promises to e-mail, promises to send boxes of belongings and sell furniture, and pets for Sylvester might have gone on the entire afternoon if Walter hadn't pointed to his watch and scooted the kids into the van.

In late September, after H  l  ne’s sister, Anastasia, a bouncy blond who adored her little niece, had moved into the penthouse with the Lutsenkos and started classes at UMKC, Beth and Arnie sat on their balcony enjoying a cool evening breeze and drinking one of the bottles of Malbec Walter had given them. Psycho Cat sat inside keeping an eye on his humans.

Beth and Arnie were discussing the messages they had just received, several of them—from Lucas, Lucia, and Walter inviting them to spend winter break in a casita on Walter’s estate, from Wyatt, Missy, and their daughter urging them to join them on the trip, and from Alana saying her parents wanted to talk before they would decide.

“So what do you think?” Beth asked. “I’ll have October to paint the rooms and replace the blinds in the sixth floor condo for the new renter to move in the first of November, and you can take a couple of weeks off your insurance consulting. All we’ll need to pay for are the plane tickets.”

“You don’t have to convince me,” Arnie said. “We’ll accept the invitation right now and book flights tomorrow.”

“I haven’t heard directly from Lucas, but Lucia sent me a newsy e-mail. She sounds happy with her new life. She said they were homesick until Rosa joined them, though. They’ll keep up their online classes and attend the village school after the summer break. I guess that would be during our winter.”

“It’s a big adjustment, but Walter seems like the kind of dad who’ll get them through it. And Beth...”

“What?”

“I’m glad you pursued your crazy quest to solve all the problems you found when we moved in here. Think how many lives your schemes have affected.”

“Nine,” Beth said with a satisfied smile. “I counted them.” She raised fingers, one at a time. “Viktor,

Hélène, Fabienne, Lucia, Lucas, Rosa, Walter, you, and me. Not to mention anyone else in the city who was being hit up for money by that dishonest Ukrainian separatist bunch.”

“Why us?”

Beth grinned. “Don’t you think we would’ve been crushed if we hadn’t been able to help our new friends?” Her eyes wandered to the doorway where Psycho Cat stood on his hind legs to paw the screen and blink at her. “Of course, I wouldn’t have known who to trust or have discovered all those clues without our Sylvester. Just think. Nine lives.”

She raised her wine glass. “To friends and family, including the furry ones.”

“Family and friends—salute.”

#

### **A Word From the Author**

Thank you for adding *Nine LiFelines* to your library. Readers depend on readers to recommend good books, and authors depend on readers to generate positive word-of-mouth for their books. If you liked this cozy mystery, I hope you'll leave a review on your favorite retailer, even if it's only a few words. It will make a big difference. I and other readers will be very thankful.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joyce Ann Brown, the author of the *Psycho Cat and the Landlady Mystery* series, set in Kansas City, was a librarian, a landlady, and a Realtor before becoming a short story and novel writer. She also has two mischievous cats.

Her actual tenants have never disappeared, murdered, or been murdered. Nor have any of them found a skeleton in the attic. Joyce has never solved a crime. Moose and Chloe, her cats, haven't sniffed out a mystery, at least not yet.

Joyce spends her days writing (with a few breaks for tennis, walking, and book clubs) so that Beth, the landlady in the series, and Sylvester, the Psycho Cat, can make up for her real-life lack of excitement in a big way.

Read more about the author and series at [www.joyceannbrown.com](http://www.joyceannbrown.com)

First Two Books in the *Psycho Cat and the Landlady Mystery* series:  
*CATastrophic Connections* , 2014  
*Furtive Investigation*, 2015

## **Reviews of *Catastrophic Connections***

The mystery is fun and upbeat, which fits the bill for a cozy; and a lot of the action is driven by dialogue. –Anakalia Klemm, author

A fun read! This book takes the reader on a wild ride from Brookside in Kansas City to St. John in the Caribbean. Sure, evil lurks, but the indomitable Beth, her family and a yowling cat know what to do. –Jean S., reader

Each chapter begins with an interesting quote from a famous mystery sleuth such as Agatha Christy or Sherlock Holmes. My favorite quote follows: "No one ever owns a cat. You share a common habitation on a basis of equal rights and mutual respect, although somehow, the cat always comes out ahead of the deal." (Lillian Jackson Braun) –Elaine Faber, author

## **Reviews of *Furtive Investigation***

Sharply defined characters (including an inquisitive cat) that you care about moving through a twisting plot. It's a murder mystery, but no one knows who the victim is (well, maybe the cat does). Author Joyce Brown does a great job of separating the good guys from the bad guys. –Frank Cook, writer

The classic whodunnit style reminiscent of Agatha Christie. As the investigation goes on, characters are gradually ruled out as either killer, victim, or both, until there is only one possibility left. –Kristen Elise, author

FURtive Investigation was everything a good mystery should be: suspenseful, can't-put-it-down entertainment. Psycho Cat added a flair of humor and magic and the characters were as real as can be. The plot was easy to follow yet I was always trying to guess who-done-it. -Don B., reader

