

Cat Killed A Rat



A PONDEROSA PINES MYSTERY

FIRST IN
A NEW
SERIES

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Cat Killed A Rat

Ponderosa Pines Cozy Mystery Series
Book 1

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When the rickety stepladder swayed to the left, Luther Plunkett hung on for dear life and muttered a string of words completely inappropriate for use inside a church. Momentary panic revved his pulse to pounding until the twenty-year-old wreck righted itself and he breathed a sigh of relief.

A section of trim around one of the rafters arching up into the cathedral ceiling had loosened enough to be in danger of falling onto the congregation. It was one of the many repairs on his list—and the only one that would necessitate climbing up onto the twelve-foot stepladder that had probably been around when dinosaurs roamed the earth. From this lofty height, everything looked different—smaller and more dangerous. The thought of taking a header onto those pews turned Luther's blood to ice in his veins.

Still, two rungs above the recommended climbing limit, Luther traded a certain amount of hubris for common sense: this wasn't his first day on the job and no matter what anyone said, he knew his way around the tools of his trade. Only half of his attention was focused on the repairs at hand, while the other half fumed and fretted over the way his brother, Evan, had railroaded him into taking on the job—at almost nothing over cost, no less.

How was he supposed to earn a decent living as a handyman if he didn't make a profit? The brother of his had no clue. Two or three good real estate commissions a year and Evan was rolling in the dough, leaving Luther to squirm in the dust.

Deeply absorbed in resentful thoughts and seething anger, Luther never heard the hushed footsteps padding toward the ladder. He felt the jolting shove, though, and felt the ladder begin to rock.

The world around him went hard and bright with fear while the ladder swayed first to the right, then back to the left. Luther scrambled down a couple of rungs and leaned against the motion to try and settle it back on a solid footing, but the force of his rushed movements only increased the pendulum-like swing. When the right hand feet lifted off the floor and the ladder passed the point of no return, Luther's heart skipped a beat and almost before it began to hammer in his chest again, the floor hurtled up to meet him.

Two days earlier.

Douchebag.

The word scrawled across Chloe's notebook made Emmalina Valentina Torrence—EV to her friends—snort out loud. Mostly because, while inelegant and downright crass, it perfectly described the annoying man currently speaking to the sizable group of citizens attending the Ponderosa Pines quarterly town meeting.

A typical New England town meeting takes place once a year, but in Ponderosa Pines, anything worth doing once was worth doing four times; hence, the quarterly town meeting. Once a year, the town voted in a new set of officials; the other three meetings were less well-attended, and most often no more than a formality. Tonight, however, the mere formality had already ended and a three ring circus was about to begin. EV could tell because they'd already brought in the clown.

After fifteen minutes of fidgeting in his seat and clearing his throat repeatedly, local handyman Luther Plunkett now held court at the front of the room. Still in his work clothes, with an attempt at an earnest expression pasted on his round, freckled face and a liberal sprinkling of sawdust in his curly, mouse-brown hair, he stalked back and forth while making his plea.

“You got my hands tied with all these regulations: recycled materials, energy efficient building. That's not the way they do things in Warren or in Gilmore. I'm a business man; I gotta be able to make a profit. You all know me. I been good to my customers: always going above and beyond, but I'm losing money on every job,” his voice rose to a whining pitch that grated EV's nerves and clenched her teeth.

What a phony; and worse, he was a phony with aspirations. More than anything, Luther wanted to elevate himself from a lowly handyman to a high-end contractor. Never mind that Ponderosa Pines had neither the population nor the commercial base to support such a desire.

“Bull pucky!” someone called out from the back of the room. “Why don't you shut up and sit down, Luther?” EV craned her head around to search unsuccessfully through the crowd for the heckler.

Luther's reputation for bragging about his abilities then providing shoddy construction had not stopped people hiring him. Without scrupulous supervision, Luther rushed around doing things to make himself look busy, while supplying homeowners with hurried, slapdash workmanship—for which he charged premium prices. His reputation was that of a greedy shyster with minimal skills and a big mouth.

Rising to her feet, EV moved toward the front of the hall, controlled fury giving her the grace of a panther stalking its prey. Tension announced itself in the clench of her fists, the way her eyes

narrowed and cooled, the angle of her chin. Long legs carried her forward until she stood toe to toe with Luther. She had six inches of height on him, and the authority of age combined with conviction sat well on her strong shoulders.

“Reducing our carbon footprint is part of the town charter, and that means building and maintaining energy efficient homes; but it also means using a percentage of recycled materials. You’re asking us to set aside our goals and regulations, not for the sake of the community, but so you can increase your profit margin?” EV’s voice fell like a rain of dry desert sand. She turned direct, brown eyes toward the crowd and brushed an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

Before Luther could answer, John Peterson spoke up, “Maybe you could explain why using reclaimed materials is so much harder on your bottom line. I know my cousin in Warren paid you enough to cover your crew plus exorbitant dump fees for tearing down that old barn of his. You ended up with a load of perfectly good lumber, enough usable steel roofing to do a house, and made a little profit on the job. You got a lot of nerve standing here complaining.”

“Give the man a break.” Evan Plunkett spoke up. No surprise there, the Plunkett brothers were cut from the same cloth. “All this green living stuff is a pipe dream. It’s time to wake up and smell the coffee,” he sneered. “Or would that be the Chai tea?”

Where Luther was ineptly incompetent, his younger brother Evan intentionally caused chaos. Driven by greed and a need for validation, he spent an inordinate amount of time scheming to gain a measure of control in town affairs. As careful as he tried to be, bits and pieces of his plans always made their way back to the town gossip mongers, who could disseminate information faster than the speed of light.

Such were the workings of the Ponderosa Pines grapevine. With roots running deep and true, its leafy goodness snaked through nearly every household in town before returning to the spot where its seed had long ago been planted: smack dab in the middle of EV’s front yard.

If a gnat sneezed in the woods, EV knew about it. Anyone with a lick of sense would have picked another chicken to pluck, another fish to try and fry. It was a lesson both Evan and Luther seemed unable to learn.

So, when Luther offered the first selectman a cheap bathroom remodel if he voted in Evan’s favor—EV knew.

When Evan got one of the survey companies he worked with in Gilmore to lay to rest a property dispute between the third selectman and her neighbor—and for once and all prove who was responsible for the dead tree neither wanted to pay to cut down—EV knew.

In the end, it had been Evan who left that meeting with his tail tucked between his legs. Thinking he had two of the town’s three selectmen tucked tightly in his pocket, it was with shock and awe that he watched as the man who was supposed to slash and burn the forest, slashed and burned any chance for a vote in his favor.

Ever since then, EV had been waiting and watching for the pair of brothers to make their next move. Tonight, there was little doubt Luther’s seemingly benign plea was the opening salvo to a new scheme.

Whether she wanted to admit it or not, at the tender age of thirty-three, EV had become the town

matriarch and now, twenty years later, she was more firmly cast in the role than ever. Ponderosa Pines, a once thriving commune, had become next best thing to a ghost town after its founders and primary owners, EV's parents, returned to their mainstream life.

Determined to save her beloved home, EV rallied the remaining residents into expanding into a planned community with the goal of becoming an eco-friendly town. Bit by bit, year by year, with the help of those remaining members, now known as the town elders, EV brought the spirit of her parent's vision into the new age.

The only thing EV and the elders hadn't counted on was that some of the next generation might not look upon Ponderosa Pines as the paradise they all considered it to be. This was the case with Evan and Luther, whose mother—herself an elder—had not passed on her love of green living and community spirit to her sons.

Following the path from changing the town's building codes to allow for the use of shoddier, mass-produced materials to its end where the door would now open for Luther to build houses on spec—houses that Evan, in his capacity as a real estate broker, could sell—was one route that needed neither a map nor a flashlight.

The whole setup was a smokescreen, EV thought as she watched the proposal get voted down. She would have bet her life on that fact. The only thing left to do was wait for the other shoe to drop.

* * *

Chloe LaRue maintained an appearance of casual interest while her keen eyes roamed around the room and observed her small community voice their opinions on Luther's proposal. Her job as gossip columnist for the *Pine Cone*, Ponderosa Pines' weekly newsletter, demanded attention to detail. 'Babble & Spin' was by far the most popular regular article, and had been since the very first issue rolled off a second-hand printing press over thirty years ago.

Too bad she couldn't take any public credit for her work; Chloe was simply the latest in a series of anonymous authors. No past writer had ever been unmasked, and Chloe wasn't about to be the first. Readers enjoyed speculating on the identity of the mystery author almost as much as they enjoyed learning scandalous information about their neighbors. Ponderosa Pines was, like most small towns, full of busybodies.

EV, as the only person Chloe ever confided in, enjoyed being privy to yet another Ponderosa secret and took great delight in helping Chloe maintain her anonymity. The fount of information stored in EV's exceptional brain was a most welcome benefit, and Chloe relied heavily on those tidbits at the beginning of her tenure at the *Cone*.

Now, as she listened to Luther continue to blather incoherently, one thought replayed in Chloe's mind:

I did not come back here only to watch the integrity of the community be lambasted by these two morons. And I won't let it happen without a fight.

* * *

Double douchebag.

Chloe underlined the indictment with a series of vicious pen slashes while EV muttered epithets under her breath until her patience snapped like a rubber band in sub-zero weather.

“To that intent and purpose, the town of Gilmore has expressed their agreement for the purpose of annotating...”

“Annexing.” Evan hissed too loudly for a whisper.

“Annexing,” Luther parroted, “the town of Ponderosa Pines.”

And there it was; EV heard the echoing thump as the other shoe hit the floor. This was what the boob brothers had been leading up to all along: an attempt to combine Ponderosa Pines with neighboring Gilmore.

A mental click followed the thump.

This must be their end game; what Evan and Luther had been working toward all along. Forehead wrinkled into furrows of frown lines, EV ran through the probabilities for why now, at the very final fiscal meeting of the year—the meeting where electing new town officials had just effectively removed anyone already allied with Evan from office—would the Plunkett brothers have raised this particular issue.

Desperation had to be driving Evan. Why else would he reveal his final desire now?

“...an unparalleled opportunity to expand into the new milieu.” Luther intoned as though he had been coached on what to say.

“You mean *millennium* you idiot. If you’re going to try putting one over on the community, at least have the decency to use the correct terminology,” EV spit the words at him.

“Oh, come on, people. Get a clue here,” a voice rose above the rumbling crowd. “This is the best idea I’ve heard in years. Let Gilmore take over the whole damn town.” Allegra Worth, who bore a striking resemblance to Cruella DeVille, declared at a higher volume than Chloe had ever heard her use before.

When she opened her mouth to add more to the comment, Allegra’s husband Ashton pinned her with a glare. Undeterred, she opened her mouth to make another comment, but was stopped by her husband rising to his feet and pulling her along with him. At first she stood her ground; but, after another pointed look, she fell into line and followed him out.

Evan puffed up at the vote of confidence until EV turned her attention on him. “I know you’re the one behind this. You have an ulterior motive somewhere at the heart of this ridiculous scheme, but I’m telling you now it’s not going to happen.”

“I only want what’s best for everyone. Expansion is growth. Don’t you want Ponderosa Pines to be the best it can be? To bring jobs to your neighbors? To increase the tax base?”

“And you seriously think letting Gilmore annex our town is the way to do that?” She turned to the rest of the seated residents. “Do you understand what he is asking? Are you all aware Evan ran for mayor in Gilmore and lost before moving back to Ponderosa Pines? Now, all of a sudden he wants the two towns to become one; and you can be sure that Gilmore, being the bigger town, would insist we go with their form of local government.” That statement elicited a collective grumble. Ponderosa Pines was proud of its Selectman system.

“Think about it. Each and every one of you would lose your voice in town decisions unless one of our own became mayor. Evan has already expressed an interest in the job. He’s betting with all of us behind him, next time, he’ll be elected.”

“That’s rich coming from you.” Evan sneered, “Face it EV; your mind went there that fast.” He snapped his fingers. “Because you’re just trying to protect your own interests. It isn’t enough for you to own more land than anyone else in town, you have to be in control of everyone, too.”

“No, Evan, that’s your agenda, not mine.” EV turned to address her neighbors and friends, “You all know me. I speak my mind but I have no interest in running the town. I’ve never accepted nomination to any office. Ponderosa Pines may not be perfect; but as a community, we’ve always worked together and we always will. What possible good could come from losing our town status? Ask yourselves what Evan and Luther stand to gain.”

Nods of agreement showed her words had struck home.

“Now that the proposal is on the table, we have to see it through; but I urge you to think long and hard about whose interests you are supporting before you make any decisions. Our streets have always been safe; our crime rates the lowest in the state. Will putting Gilmore, and possibly him,” she pointed at Evan, “in charge keep them that way? Or will it line his and Luther’s pockets at the expense of our children’s safety?”

With a pointed look that Chloe easily interpreted as, “Stay, observe, and report back to me later,” EV strode from the room.

* * *

Dead silence descended on the meeting in the first moments after EV’s departure, then erupted in a dull roar as several townspeople left the Grange Hall. Those remaining broke into smaller groups, each trying to talk over the next. Amid the increasing noise, the town elders tried to help the three newly-appointed selectmen regain control by shouting for order.

Under normal conditions, the opinions of the elders, the very first Ponderosa Pines residents, carried authority—but tonight their voices dropped unheard into the din.

Chloe seized the opportunity to eavesdrop discretely and began to assess the room for the most interesting candidates.

Millie Jacobs and Summer Beckett lounged against a wall near the door to the hall’s kitchen, heads bent together and snickering. Chloe wouldn’t get any useful information out of either one of them.

airheads. They undoubtedly had already decided they wanted the opposite of whatever EV wanted for the community.

Jealous mean girls, that's what you are. And you're way too old for that crap. Chloe spat silently in their general direction while pasting a convincing fake smile on her face.

Not that EV had ever noticed, but Millie and Summer harbored a mutual grudge against Chloe's closest friend just because each of their husbands had been colossally stupid enough to admit they had found EV attractive. EV was the kind of woman men noticed. With no idea of the undercurrent, Evan had been nothing but nice to these women—had no idea they bore malice toward her since she had never laid eyes on either man in an inappropriate manner. Being a desirable woman didn't make her a man stealer.

Noticing that the initial furor had finally died down, Chloe continued her evaluation of the room. A tall, muscular man wearing a rather impressive Fu Manchu mustache stood chatting with an older lady sporting knitted garments in varying colors. From the bright red beret perched jauntily on top of her head to the lime green and hot pink chevron print purse hanging from her shoulder, and with her beetle-like nose, Priscilla Lewellyn looked, for all the world, like a tie-dyed chicken.

Fu Manchu's name was Horis, and Chloe wondered for the millionth time if he was hoping the elaborate mustache would draw attention away from the way his bottle-bottom glasses magnified his eyes and his unfortunate given name. Oh, what she wouldn't do to give this man a total makeover. Poor guy didn't realize there was no such thing as "dress overalls", or that he was actually a decent catch underneath the dorky exterior.

Horis was a farmer and a leader of the group of volunteers responsible for planning and organizing the community's many gardens. He was also a sweet, soft-spoken man who loved Ponderosa Pines and would presumably fight to keep Evan from rising to power. Priscilla was pleasant but eccentric; and while Chloe thought she would side with EV, something about the woman's fluttery nature made her hard to read.

Weaving through the small crowd avoiding eye contact and putting out the I'm-not-here vibe, Chloe lingered near the pair until she caught enough of their conversation to conclude that neither would favor Evan as mayor. Nothing to worry about here.

As she peered across the room, she noticed a couple around her age who were fairly new to the community: David and Rhonda Erickson, she believed were their names. Both nondescript in appearance, they seemed like nice people who, judging by the protrusion from Rhonda's midsection, would become a family of three within the next six or seven months.

I'll keep quiet about that, Chloe thought, don't want to put my foot in my mouth in case Rhonda has just been sampling too many whoopie pies from The Mudbucket.

David's arms were wrapped around Rhonda's shoulders, his head bent toward hers with a worried expression on his face. They were so deep in conversation they didn't notice as Chloe slowly made her way close enough to catch a few snippets.

"That woman seems like she cares, David. We moved here to get away from the materialist world, not have to deal with some dictatorial mayor."

"He's the one who sold us on this town in the first place. We could tell he cared about it. Now

because of the words of one whacked-out hippie chick we're going to crucify him?"

"That 'whacked-out hippie chick' was behind the grant that helped us buy the coffee shop. Rhonda's eyes flashed heat.

"How did you find that out? I thought the grant came from the town."

"That woman *is* the town. She might gloss over it, and from what I can tell, she's very low key about it—well, except for maybe tonight—but every good thing that has been built here, she's had her hand in. Evan may have talked up the town but it was to make the sale. I could tell that from the beginning." Something about him had given Rhonda the tingle since the first time she'd heard his smooth voice on the phone.

"Don't you think we'd get more business if we were technically located in Gilmore?"

Rhonda cocked her head and stared at her husband. "How do you think? Is there some invisible wall between here and Gilmore that would come down once the two towns combine? Don't you think it's more likely our taxes would increase and we'd have a bunch of new regulations to follow?" Rhonda was the more business-minded of the two but David was an artist in the kitchen.

"All I'm saying is, let's learn as much as we can about both of them before we take sides. We have more here to think about than just us." Rhonda confirmed Chloe's theory about her waistline.

As usual, the two 'weird sisters'—who were neither weird, nor sisters, according to EV—watched with great interest but said nothing. So rarely did they speak up at a town event, Chloe wasn't sure she had ever heard either of their voices. Their reputation for being witches was also something she had yet to confirm. EV said they were, but Chloe had her doubts. They would follow EV, though.

Having learned enough to see the majority supported the town remaining a singular entity, Chloe left the hall and headed home for some much-needed rest.

As she ambled down the tree-lined path that led away from the portion of Ponderosa Pines that could be considered “downtown” and headed in the general direction of her house, Chloe met the daily mindfulness goal she set for herself. Each day since she moved back home she tried to take at least a few moments to feel present in her body and appreciate her surroundings.

After traveling for so long, even beautiful, majestic scenery seemed commonplace to the extent that Chloe no longer paid attention to the world around her. Tunnel vision threatened to infect other areas of her life negatively affecting her overall well-being. Focusing solely on completing the myriad of tasks required of her each day, while ignoring secondary needs and desires, took its toll. When she realized she felt trapped in her own life and body, Chloe decided it was time for a major change.

Coming back to the Pines, finding home again, was the first step in shrugging off the been-there-done-that rut she had fallen into.

Tonight, Chloe’s one mindful thought was merely how beautiful the town of Ponderosa Pines had become. The community, named for the trees it was nestled among, committed itself to live gently on the land, to work with rather than against the ecology. Willing residents kept once-dense forest cleaned and thinned to make room for natural paths running throughout the town.

This section of the woods, her favorite, was frequently traveled. Twinkly lights festooned the path leading to a decorated area appropriately deemed “The Fairy Garden”. Fairies of all sizes, shapes, and artistic media peeked out from beneath rocks or from their perches inside hollowed trunks and hung shimmering from every third or fourth tree limb Chloe passed. Each Ponderosa resident had contributed a fairy or two to the garden over the years—at least every resident except Chloe.

She was saving her fairy for the moment when she finally stopped holding herself back—when she let go of always being an outsider and finally embraced her place in the Pines. Years of being “the new girl” at school segued seamlessly into becoming “the new girl” at work while Chloe moved from job to job to job looking for fulfillment that never came.

Ponderosa Pines had accepted Chloe; it was just that kind of place. The fact that she was a member of one of the founding families cinched the deal. But being accepted was different from feeling fully at home, and that was something Chloe had struggled with for most of her life.

Was the restless urge to run hereditary? Her mom certainly had it in spades: and for Lila it was a case of always running toward the next exciting adventure, whereas Chloe’s desperate urge often carried the flavor of running away.

No more.

Something about this place had woven through her subconscious, whispered in the corners of her mind, called her back with the promise of home.

Now it was time to see if that promise was real, or if it was just a mirage.

At the edge of the wooded path Chloe emerged into full moonlight and veered toward where her home sat in the oldest part of town. The mindful hike had worked its magic, putting her into a state of hyper focus which she used to contemplate the meeting she had just attended.

Would the community come together the way they always had in the past? Could she trust them to make the right decision or would it be time to pack it in and move on? Even if she hadn't trusted EV as implicitly as she did, it was apparent to Chloe that combining with Gilmore would change the Pine completely. Gone would be the stress on equality, teamwork, and freedom of choice that had always been in keeping with her family's ideal of what the community should be.

Approaching her house, warm lamplight shining through the windows, it looked like a painting in the deepening twilight. Chloe couldn't hold back a smile. Dwarfed by the spreading branches of a huge Sugar Maple tree, the cottage home was unobtrusive and cozy, and Chloe didn't regret a day spent in her personal paradise.

Once her mother had accepted her daughter's desperate desire to go home, she had gifted Chloe with the deed. Though she had never lived here full time before, it was the only place Chloe remembered returning to during the years when Lila had carted her around the world like a knapsack. She was grateful for those experiences, but was happier here than she had been at any other point in her life.

Chloe's grandparents built what started as a simple cabin, barely finishing it before her mother was born. They were happy here for several years while the commune rose up around them. Primarily constructed out of cordwood, a cheap and popular medium used extensively throughout the community, the main house exterior resembled mosaic tile. Stacking cross-sections of whole and split logs and cementing them into place created two-foot-thick walls that both decorated and insulated the building. Assorted pieces of beach glass, stone, and tile were set into the cement between the logs to create even more artistic interest.

Her favorite touch held a place of honor above the front door; a single log, two feet in diameter with a natural heart shaped pattern in its center. Its mate took center stage above EV's door, both having been cut and placed at the same time by Chloe's grandfather and EV's father.

EV, hearing a slew of unexpected curse words coming from Chloe's backyard about a month after she had moved in, investigated and found Chloe nearly into a pile of cut evening primrose she had mistaken for a weed. Looking around the yard EV realized that Chloe had bitten off a bit more than she could chew, pulled her inside and brewed them both a pot of tea.

Together they brought the garden back to life while forming an unbreakable friendship. Chloe loved to sit in the screen house and survey her little corner of the world. Stone paths curled around dozens of patches of earth containing a plethora of garden art and several hidden places Chloe visited to practice yoga.

Her Gramps had spent a year with knives, gouges, and chisels to carve a Celtic cross into the arched-top front door that Chloe had religiously locked every day until EV chided her. This was not the city; this was a safe place where neighbors worked together, played together and looked out for one another. There was always a helping hand at the ready, and Chloe knew she could knock on any door and receive assistance if she ever needed it.

“Nothing bad ever happens in Ponderosa Pines” was the town mantra. It drifted through her head and quieted her thoughts as she readied for bed. Chloe relished the notion as she floated off to sleep to the sounds of chirping crickets and croaking tree frogs.

When EV had stalked down the same path half an hour ahead of Chloe, meditative walking had been the farthest thing from her mind. She stomped through the fairy garden barely resisting the urge to kick one of the winged creations to kingdom come. It would feel so good.

In another forty-five minutes, an hour at the most, the Ponderosa Pines gossip mill would start to kick into full grinding mode. Before that happened, EV needed time to think about the possible repercussions from tonight's meeting.

Her long legs ate the hike through the woods like a dieter gulping down a midnight binge. Once home, she circled her living room with the frustrated energy of a caged tiger until it became clear pacing wasn't enough to provide release. Glancing at her watch to gauge how far along she was in the countdown to gossip liftoff, EV took the stairs to her bedroom two at a time.

After yanking a tank top and yoga pants onto her lanky frame, she smoothed her hair into a stubby tail at the back of her head. Chloe's yoga might be the commune-approved method of stress relief, but EV preferred beating the living crap out of something. To that end, she had installed a punching bag at the far end of her bedroom.

No gloves tonight. Only the force of bare skin against firm leather would do.

Ten minutes later, coated in a light sheen of sweat, she was lost to the rhythm—jab, jab, kick, jab, kick. She pummeled the bag into submission until her entire body hummed into a zen state.

Tomorrow's bruises would serve as a reminder that letting Evan goad her this deeply into the red had given him power over her.

When the special ring tone that signaled a text from Chloe sounded, EV heaved a sigh and flicked the touchscreen to open her message folder.

Common sense rules, douchebag drools—Mata Hari

A second text shot into her inbox.

Looks like he mostly got the bobble-heads and Cruella so far. Maybe one or two others and the fence sitters are minimal.

Thumbs flying, EV typed a reply.

I'll be tending the grapevine the rest of the evening.

I think this is going to die down without much of a fuss. Chloe might be right, but EV suspected the fuss was just beginning.

Don't put money on it.

To EV's way of thinking, politics and deer ticks were not that far different. They both carried the kind of disease that could make life a living hell; the only difference was that deer ticks were more easily avoided and you could pick them off with just a little tug while politics dug in deeper.

Her blood pressure had just settled back into the normal range when the phone pealed with the first call of the night. It was well past the witching hour when she finally fell into bed.

Chapter 4

Chloe finished dabbing her lips with a bit of fruity gloss and stepped back to assess her reflection in the mirror. Blond hair fell in waves around a pretty, heart-shaped face and almond-colored eyes. Hours spent outdoors had given her natural highlights that would have cost a fortune at any decent salon and a smattering of light freckles across her petite but slightly upturned nose.

The last time Chloe dolled herself up was months ago, but an impending night out had her dressed to the nines. She wore a pair of teal and bright blue color-blocked (and surprisingly comfortable) wedges; a white, fitted maxi skirt with blue stitching; and a flowing teal tank top that showed off just enough cleavage.

Just before leaving the bathroom, Chloe gave her hair one last fluff and then checked to make sure her underwear wasn't showing through her skirt. That would be embarrassing.

The girls were due any minute now, and Chloe was excited for an evening that didn't consist of sifting through gossip and contemplating conspiracy theories. She and her friends had only seen each other in passing lately and hadn't all been together at the same time for weeks. An evening of fun was definitely in order, and she was guaranteed a good time whenever Veronica and Mindy were involved.

She heard the doorbell ring and yelled from the hallway "get your asses in here already; you know the doorbell is for losers!" Bounding to the foyer she flung the door open and came face to face with Nathaniel Harper, the last person she would have expected.

"So that's an open invitation then, huh?" he asked, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Chloe put a hand on her hip and stuck her tongue out at Nate before reaching up to hug her oldest childhood friend.

"When did you get back?" she exclaimed as she ushered him into her living room. The stack of blue, white and teal bangle bracelets jangled on her wrist as Chloe handed Nate a glass of the red wine she had been aerating for her friends.

"Late last night."

"And what brings you back to our itty bitty town? I thought you were some hotshot detective in the city. Or has your mother blown your accomplishments out of proportion?" Chloe fiddled with the rhinestone-studded pendant that hung around her neck.

Everyone knew Barbara Harper thought the sun rose and set on her son, but they also knew it was with good reason since Nathaniel had always flown the straight and narrow and deserved all the accolades he received.

"Apparently hot shot detectives aren't immune to injury. I damaged my rotator cuff swinging off a fire escape to catch a suspect and had to have surgery. I've got another month of therapy and I hate desk duty so my boss sent me here to keep an eye on his newest deputy and 'get back to my roots'. Ask me how thrilled I am."

Nate rose from the couch and wandered into the kitchen. She knew precisely what he was looking for, and when he returned holding a giant no-bake cookie Chloe couldn't help but smile. She had reorganized cabinets and closets, replaced several pieces of furniture and added her own flair to the

decor, but one thing she couldn't bring herself to change was the location of her Nana's goody cabinet.

Though she claimed keeping the old orange and white Tupperware container stocked with what Nana had called "brown cookies" was a gesture meant to satisfy the children who frequently ran rampant through her home, there was more to it than that. Each time she repeated the old ritual of boiling butter, sugar, and chocolate over medium heat, then adding peanut butter and oatmeal and pouring the batter onto waxed paper Chloe was carrying on a beloved tradition.

It warmed her heart to know Nate also remembered the treats, and that he felt comfortable enough in her home to nip one without asking. It also warmed her heart to know that he'd be sticking around for a while.

"Well I, for one, am glad you're back."

* * *

This time there was no doorbell, just the sound of Chloe's girlfriends chattering as they pushed through the front door, picked up a glass of wine each, and deposited themselves on her couch.

Chloe's two best friends could not have differed more in both appearance and personality.

Mindy, a lively redhead whose petite stature and ever-so-slightly pointed ears gave her an elf-like quality, had been dating the same guy practically since middle school. Neither had any desire to get married or have kids—a point of view that was not out of place in a community where many couples had never officially tied the knot, or had been bound by ritual handfasting in place of a traditional wedding ceremony.

Veronica, on the other hand, was a striking brunette with a husband and a current total of five children. All that childbearing had only enhanced her voluptuous shape, making it the epitome of an hourglass figure and the subject of much envy from the less fortunate women of Ponderosa Pines. Her somewhat dippy nature belied a level of intelligence that continually surprised and pleased her closest friends.

You could have a highly sophisticated philosophical discussion with Veronica one minute, then spend the next hour convincing her the large bird she saw flying around was definitely not a pterodactyl. This was her monthly kid-free outing; it was unusual to see her without a child attached to her hip.

That left Chloe as the only one of the three not in a committed relationship, and she was okay with that for the time being. She loved Veronica's kids like nieces and nephews, but enjoyed being able to hand them back at the end of the day.

"Was that Nathaniel Harper I just saw coming out of your house? When did Mr. Hottie get back to town?" Veronica asked. Chloe could tell she was practically drooling. It was true that Nathaniel was a good looking man. Everyone but Chloe saw a tall, muscular physique; blue eyes coated in thick, black lashes; and wavy chestnut hair that curled just around his temples. But to her he was still a small child giving her wet willies when she least expected, and an awkward teenager growing into lanky limbs and protruding ears.

Every few years when Lila and Chloe would visit the Pines, she and Nate would fall back into

natural friendship. They even tried making out once during high school, but it hadn't ended well. She didn't remember who started laughing first.

“Last night, and he's not planning on leaving anytime soon, either.” Chloe filled Veronica and Mindy in on Nate's new position with the police department.

“You sure you don't want a piece of that, Chlo?” asked Mindy with a suggestive raise of her brows. “I'm sure he'd happily put you in cuffs anytime you're up for it.”

Veronica and Mindy both knew Chloe had no interest in Nate, but they also loved poking fun at her perpetual single status and weren't going to give up until she had hooked up.

“Let it go, and let's get going before we miss all the fun.” Chloe practically pulled them out the door and into the car.

* * *

Ten minutes later, singing a Cyndi Lauper song loudly and off key, Chloe pulled into the neon-lit, splashed parking lot of the Barnyard, a favorite Gilmore hangout, and they all piled out of her battered Mini Cooper. The Barnyard was aptly named. Once a falling down wreck, the nearly hundred-year-old barn had been rehabilitated and turned into an entertainment center for adults who wanted to act like children—which meant the place was always busy and always a good time.

A circular bar occupied the center of the enormous barn, surrounded by high-top tables and mismatched bar stools. The front right corner of the room held a vintage arcade complete with games like Super Mario Bros, Centipede, and Skee-ball. The other corner boasted several pool tables and dart boards, a few booths, and a number of flat screen TVs playing everything from sports to old movies and 80's MTV videos.

The entire back of the barn was reserved for dancing, live music, and karaoke. Mismatched tables formed a patchwork patterned dance floor and helped maintain the comfortable, homey vibe that encouraged customers to stay late and drink profusely. Photo booths scattered throughout the barn streamed pictures onto a big screen mounted above the dance floor so that everyone could see just how silly you were acting behind the curtains.

After carefully surveying the room Chloe, Veronica, and Mindy headed for an unoccupied booth in the pool and dart room, which also just happened to be filled with a variety of attractive male specimens. While Chloe was the only one who could reap those particular benefits, Veronica and Mindy never turned down a chance to objectify the opposite sex. They were both on the prowl to find a date for their friend and began pointing out possibilities before ordering the first round of drinks.

“Cowboy Boots over there would definitely do in a pinch.” Mindy nodded toward a man in tight fitting jeans and a flannel shirt while absently accepting a vodka soda with lime from their waitress.

“Eh, not really my thing. I'm more a t-shirt and flip-flops kind of girl. Preferably a tight t-shirt bursting with arm muscles, but cowboy boots just always look a little girly to me.”

“What about Socks & Sandals by the dart board in the corner?” Veronica asked with a sly grin. “What situation do you suppose he's preparing for where he needs both?”

“Ooh, ooh, I spotted the hipsters!” Mindy exclaimed, pointing toward a table of guys in their late 20’s who were obviously members of one of the more obnoxious social groups to have emerged lately. From the tops of their fedora-adorned Bieber-cut heads to their custom-designed Converse sneakers, everything about them irritated Chloe to no end.

“You’re not a lumberjack; you don’t hunt to survive; and every time I see you, you’re drinking craft beer or a mocha-choca-frappa-latte with extra foam. Therefore, you did not earn and do not deserve that beard you’re sporting! Beards and skinny jeans, brilliant combination.” she ranted in the general direction.

“OK, forget the hipsters; you know what a trigger they are for Chloe” Veronica admonished Mindy with a mischievous grin.

Chloe looked around at the men in the room, trying to imagine herself approaching someone with the intent of making a romantic connection. It had been quite a while since her last relationship traveling had taken its toll, and she had never been one for long term commitments.

Most men were intimidated by her independence, and allowing work to rule her life had left little room for anyone or anything else. She had been on one or two dates since returning to Ponderosa Pines, but had learned rather quickly that privacy in this town was harder to come by than a two-dollar bill.

Just because she hadn’t liked when Rosalina Emmons’ son had taken her to a “nice dinner” at the Snack Shack, or that all Shane Davis wanted to talk about was the pot plants he was trying to grow in the field behind the cow pasture didn’t mean she was a snob who was too good for everyone in town.

Enough had been enough when she had heard someone she barely knew discussing the awkward kiss the latter had tried to land on her at the end of the night. Nope, she would no longer be accepting dates with anyone who lived in the Pines. Unfortunately, since she rarely left the little hamlet anymore, her chances of meeting anyone had diminished to the point where she had decided there was a chance she would wind up an old lady with 57 cats.

“Hey, isn’t that Talia Plunkett over there dancing like it’s 1999?” Mindy pointed not at a conspicuously at the wife of the man Chloe and EV unaffectionately referred to as Douchebag #1. Luther didn’t deserve the title of number one; he lacked the faculties necessary to be taken seriously in any capacity.

His wife, on the other hand, was a horse of a different color. Far more desirable than Luther, it was a mystery to many—and to Talia’s sister Lottie in particular—how the pair had come together in the first place. Lottie hated Luther, partly because she was insanely jealous that her younger sister, Talia, had married before she did.

Peering past Talia’s vibrating backside, Chloe observed Luther’s dancing skills, and once again came down on Lottie’s side in her estimation of the couple. Talia seemed to be enjoying herself thoroughly. *To each their own*, Chloe thought.

Veronica, ignoring the fact that the woman was clearly drunk and attempting to perform a sex number that was coming off more like the chicken dance, zeroed in on what she considered most important about the scene: fashion. “I know Luther jacks prices a bit, but do you suppose he really has enough money for her to be spending hundreds of dollars on a scarf? That’s vintage Pucci, if I’m not

mistaken. It must have cost a pretty penny.”

Raising five kids left little cash for luxuries like expensive accessories, but Veronica was still a fiend. She bargain shopped and mixed vintage finds with cheap knockoffs, always managing to look chic and original. Trusting that Veronica knew her Pucci, Chloe filed the comment away in the back of her mind for later contemplation.

“Time for a trip to the Ladies, ladies. Anyone need a touch up?” Mindy led them on a winding path toward the restrooms and through saloon doors labeled “Cowgirls”. The line stretched almost back to the door, and Chloe kept one ear perked for gossip; she couldn’t allow any prime opportunity for column fodder to go unchecked—no matter how much she had wanted a night away. If a Pine Bluff resident was mentioned within earshot, Chloe was going to do her best to *accidentally* overhear anything that might prove useful.

Snaking around the corner and into a section of restroom lined with three stalls, Chloe and her friends overheard a familiar name as the two women occupying the stalls carried on what they couldn’t have possibly thought was a private conversation. *Jackpot.*

“...Evan, that guy who ran for mayor. He tried to get me to go on a date with him, telling me he was ‘setting himself up to be the most powerful man in Gilmore’ and that I should ‘hop on board the Evan train while I had the chance.’” Chloe rolled her eyes at the last comment, while Mindy stifled a hysterical giggle.

“Well, *I* heard he’s got a clandestine affair going on with some woman in that sorry excuse for a town. He’ll never get into office with a scandal like that going around.”

As the three women stepped out of their respective stalls almost simultaneously, Chloe and her friends shot each other looks of amusement and quietly took their places inside hoping to hear the next part of the conversation. At that moment the DJ’s booming voice rose above the music and whisked away whatever words were spoken. *Interesting*, thought Chloe. *Very interesting.*

Parked in front of the church where Luther was supposed to be working, Evan's stomach clenched then tossed up a wash of acid when he saw the now familiar handwriting scrawled across the third envelope in the pile of mail he'd tossed onto his passenger seat earlier. Whoever had his nuts in the wringer must be fully connected because it had only been two days since the town meeting, and it took at least a day to get mail here from Gilmore.

He'd failed; Evan knew that as he raked a hand through his hair with short, angry strokes until it stood uncharacteristically on end. He'd figured EV would kick up a ruckus, which was why he had tried to work around her by setting up a meeting with the selectmen first. When they hadn't gone for the plan, he saw no other choice than to lay it out at the quarterly meeting. He should have known that nothing much went on in Ponderosa Pines without her knowledge. Knocking her down a peg or two while she watched some of her iron-fisted control slip away was nearly as big a draw as getting out of the tight spot he was in.

Being blackmailed into convincing the townspeople of Ponderosa Pines to throw in and combine their town with neighboring Gilmore had not seemed like much of a hardship since it dovetailed nicely with his deepest desire: to launch a political career by becoming mayor. Total win-win, really. His mind spun out the fantasy—Ponderosa Pines citizens would jump on the opportunity to be annexed by the larger town. Then, in order to maintain some feeling of control, they would wield their voting power to slap his butt in the mayor's office where he could finally take Miss Holier Than Thou Torrence off her high horse and, as an added bonus, make the blackmail go away.

He knew high and mighty EV thought he was all about the money, but she was wrong. He had plans for Ponderosa Pines. Once he was in a position of authority, and had the blackmailer off his back, he could work toward opening up the middle of town, let in a smaller chain store or two, take some of the tax burden off the community and provide jobs.

Before it was all over, he'd be considered a genius, a benevolent benefactor even. They'd erect a statue of him in the center of town. He'd be the man who saved this godforsaken hole of a planned community from itself.

Evan was still basking in that daydream when his brother pulled up behind him. Luther slammed the pickup door, annoyance evident in the way he moved, "I was out with my wife. What's so all-fire important that you needed me to get the the church tonight?"

"I thought you were going to be working. You're going to finish here by tomorrow, right?"

"Probably not. I'd need two guys to help, but I got all the workers over in Emerson digging holes to pour footings for that addition. Can't ask them to work all day and all night, too."

Luther hefted a small stack of trim molding over one shoulder, nearly slapping his brother in the head with it as he turned to go back inside.

Clamping down on the urge to punch his own sibling, Evan merely pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers to relieve the tension headache that threatened to settle there.

“It’s not a paying job; I gotta keep my guys on the paying work or I don’t make no money.” The whine in Luther’s tone grated on Evan’s nerves.

“Then do it yourself. Just get it done by end of day tomorrow. I got another blackmail letter today, and I need as many chips as I can cash in with the board before the referendum meeting in a few days. This needs to go in my favor or I’m toast. With that witch against me, I’m screwed unless I can line up the selectmen on my side. And that’s never going to happen unless you do your part.”

“I still think you should just talk to her. EV’s not as bad as you think. You used to like her. “

“Yeah, well, things change.” Evan poked Luther in the shoulder, “Now tell me you’re going to finish up here by tomorrow.” It was an order.

“Only way that’s going to happen is if I work all night.”

“If that’s what it takes...” Evan broke off when he heard the footsteps and voices of a couple out for an evening stroll. “He’s got me by the short hairs. Do you need me to lay it out for you?” He left off the *again*, but it was implied in his condescending tone. His brother might be good at fibbing his way into jobs, but there was no doubt which one of them had gotten the brains in the family. Luther liked to say that his customer service skills were top notch and that it was because he knew how to talk to potential clients, that he was *articular*. Every time he heard and corrected his brother, it set Evan’s teeth on edge.

What an idiot.

Still, Evan had promised his mother that he would look after his older brother. And what kind of deal was that anyway? Shouldn’t it be the other way around? Shows she hadn’t had much confidence in Luther’s skills.

Getting him on board had been easy enough; all it had taken was a promise to loosen up on the building codes that forced Luther to use certain materials—materials that he could not mark up to make more money. It was the first step in getting rid of the alternative building requirements. Then there had been the promise of more work.

Flipping his brother a piece of the commercial pie was not as much a given as Evan had led Luther to believe. There was no way he was up to the challenge of actually being a contractor on any scale, especially at the level required for what Evan had in mind. The smaller projects that he was barely qualified for would keep him busy for a couple years; and, right now, Evan needed him to be a vocal proponent for incorporating the two towns together.

What Luther also didn’t know was that Evan didn’t give a tiny rat’s tuckus whether he helped his brother or not. Getting into office was his main focus. Increasing commercialism was just one of his plans and not even the one most likely to further his ambitions.

A career in real estate, even a lucrative one, paled in comparison to his true life’s ambition of becoming a politician. It should be an easy progression from small town mayor to becoming a member of the House of Representatives and from there, to Senate or Congress.

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