

DOGGONE

By D.M. Buckley

CHAPTER 1

I've been told, by my mother, that sometimes life throws you a curveball. My name is Alexis O'Malley, and I don't know about curveballs, but I've been smacked several times, right in the middle of the forehead, by some pretty hard hitting fast balls; like the time I almost burned my sister's house down--the thing with water and grease fires--and the time Nicky Romano broke his arm when the rope broke on the tire swing at my Aunt Scarlet's lake house and everyone blamed me. Not my fault, more or less. My most recent fast ball was losing my job as a grounds keeper at the zoo. Okay, so I sort of quit, but I have two words in my defense, elephant poop.

Except for the fact that I now had no income, it was no great loss. By trade I was actually a software programmer, but when the economy went into the toilet I'd been laid off, and after spending seven years in a windowless office, the last four of which I'd been forced to supervise a bunch of whiny, egotistical, bad-tempered crybabies, I'd found myself smiling during the exit interview, which was my first clue I needed a change.

Determined to find a new career, I'd accepted the zoo job. My first thought was, how cool is this? Fresh air, exercise and cute, cuddly animals to boot. I just hadn't anticipated the huge, stinky piles of poop.

So here I was, unemployed...again, my savings practically depleted, living in a little dump above my landlord's garage and driving an old clunker.

Now I was feeling the ball coming hard at me again. I had just hung up with Aunt Scarlet, who had managed to shame me into helping her search for Bubba.

"After all," she had said, "you're unemployed now. You have plenty of time to help an old woman."

Jeez, I'd thought, as I'd crossed my eyes and stuck my tongue out at the phone.

"Aunt Scar, what makes you think I'd have any better luck than you? I'm not a detective you know," I'd argued. "I wouldn't have any idea where to begin looking for him. And besides, I have interviews and stuff."

"That's crap, Lexi, and you know it!"

"Man, you're tough," I'd replied laughing, but as guilt won over sanity, I'd reluctantly agreed to see what I could do, figuring I might as well add out of luck to the mix since dog detective wasn't exactly the great new profession I'd had in mind.

Although it was a close race, of all my relatives, Aunt Scarlet was probably the most eccentric. She had a large collection of peculiar animals and an almost eerie connection with them. Bubba was one of her special projects. He was a big, dopey, black Lab she had found half dead on her back porch when he was just a pup. Somehow, he had managed to crawl up the steps and had almost made it to the back door before he collapsed. When Aunt Scarlet found him he was covered in blood, barely breathing and had half an ear missing. She had nursed him back to health with a lot of love and care, and he hadn't been far from her sight since.

Now, he was nowhere to be found. He hadn't come when Aunt Scarlet called him for dinner last night or breakfast this morning, and beside herself with worry, she had called me.

I had no idea where to begin, but since I had no job opportunities staring me in the face, I threw on jeans and a sweat shirt, pulled my hair up into a ponytail, grabbed a baseball cap and my keys, and was on my way to her house.

My car was a blue, sixty-five Ford Fairlane, with no floorboard in the back, a hole in the driver's seat the size of my rear with an old carpet sample shoved in to keep me from falling through, and it always seemed to be out of oil, but it got me where I wanted to go and it was all I could afford.

With a little coaxing it started once again and I backed into the street. When I pulled into Aunt Scarlet's driveway she was standing on the front porch, wringing her hands, waiting for me to perform a miracle.

"Hi, Aunt Scar," I called as I got out of my car. "Don't worry, we'll find him. He's probably just wandered off after that slut poodle down the road."

"What makes you think she's a slut?" Aunt Scarlet asked, easily distracted.

"Because every time I see her she's pregnant."

"That doesn't mean she's a slut. Maybe her owners are breeding her."

"Yeah, with every dog within a ten mile radius," I replied with a chuckle.

"Besides, Bubba's been fixed."

"Then I'd ask that vet for a refund. I've caught him more than once trying to hump Miss Priss; until they both fell over, that is."

"She can't help it. Miss Priss only has three legs you know."

I was getting a headache, but at least she was thinking about something else.

"So, how's Henrietta Chickenhead doing?" I asked, trying to keep her thoughts away from Bubba as I followed her into the house.

One of her latest rescues, Henrietta was a mixed breed parrot with an injured wing she'd adopted from the animal shelter. The feathers on top of her head stood straight up, giving her an odd appearance. Hence the name.

"Her wing is healing just fine and she seems to be happy here," Aunt Scarlet replied hesitantly.

"I hear a but in there."

"She hasn't uttered a word. The animal shelter told me she was part African Grey. African Grey's are supposed to talk."

"Count your blessings, Aunt Scar. Once she's healed and comfortable, you probably won't be able to shut her up."

"Maybe you're right. I just wish she'd let me know she's on the mend."

"So...where do you suppose I should start looking for Bubba?" I asked, having no desire to pursue that remark.

"Well, I hadn't thought about that slut down the road. If he wandered off with her, they could be down by the lake."

"Then I'm off to the lake. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

The only way to get to the opposite side of the lake, where the brush was heavy and possible hiding places were numerous, was to drive back to the main road and around, so I hopped in my car and started backing out of the driveway.

She lived in a heavily wooded section of Odessa at the end of a dirt road, and as I maneuvered my car over tree roots and pot

holes, making my way back to the highway, I couldn't help wondering, once again, why she chose to live such a secluded life. My parents, and other aunts and uncles, had all grown up, raised their families, and still lived in Seminole Heights, a blue collar section of Tampa, where most of the homes were frame construction, lots were large and neighbors were friendly.

Aunt Scarlet had purchased five acres on Lake Keystone in Odessa sometime in her early thirties, built a home and moved away from the rest of the family. She still socialized with them on a regular basis though, and the only comments my family ever made were regarding the fact that she had never married and the menagerie of unusual pets she surrounded herself with. Nevertheless, I was curious about the circumstances that led to her move.

The cut-off to the other side of the lake wasn't far down the main highway, and taking it, I once again maneuvered my car over tree roots and pot holes, looking for a place to park. I found an indentation in some bushes, pulled off the dirt road as much as possible, and turned off the ignition. As I exited my car, I began looking for a broken branch large enough to beat the bushes with, something to scare away animals, or e-e-w, snakes. I found something suitable and started walking the perimeter of the lake, calling out to Bubba as I parted brush, beat at heavy bushes and stumbled over big rocks.

The area surrounding the back side of the lake seemed to go on forever, and after two hours I was soaking wet from the humidity and physical labor, with nothing yet to show for my efforts. As I widened my circle and started again, going deeper into the brush, something caught my attention--a sound out of place--and as I paused to scan the area, a tingling began to crawl up my spine all the way to the roots of my hair. The eerie feeling that I was being watched slipped through my mind, and totally

creeped out, I decided it was time to head back to Aunt Scarlet's. As I race walked to my car, the hairs on my arms stood up like little soldiers, but I continued to call out Bubba's name, trying to appear calm.

I had left the car door unlocked, not anticipating any trespassers, so it was no problem to just open the door and fall in, but I was flustered, and trying to feed the keys into the ignition was another story. When I finally managed to get it started, I sped out of the wooded area like a bat out of hell.

Back on the main road, I made my way back to Aunt Scarlet's, pried my fingers off the steering wheel and jumped out of the car.

Aunt Scarlet must have heard me coming because she was waiting on the porch when I arrived. After tripping over my own feet as I exited my car, and doing a little jig to regain my balance, I tried to hide my concern as I headed to the house.

"New dance step. I'm taking classes and I guess the music just got me excited," I lied.

"I should go with you!" she exclaimed. "I'm quite the dancer you know. The jitterbug, the charleston, the fox trot, the tango. I still have great legs, and in my day I could really cut the rug. I bet I could show them a thing or two. I wonder if they need any instructors."

Uh-oh, I thought. "It's not that kind of dancing, Aunt Scar. It's more modern, improvisational, hip-hoppy. I don't think you'd like it," I stammered. Then, quickly changing the subject, I asked, "Has Bubba shown up yet? I didn't even find a hint of him at the lake."

"No, and I'm not sure where to look next. Do you think he could have chased after a car? Oh no, I hadn't thought of that. He could have been run over!"

"I don't think Bubba has the energy to chase after a car. And wherever he is, I'm sure he's fine. Don't fret; we'll find him. If he doesn't show up, I'll start looking again tomorrow."

I followed her into the house, almost stepping on a tiny black kitten as it dashed in front of me. Startled, I jumped back, practically knocking Aunt Scarlet on her ass.

"So who is this?" I asked as I reached out an arm to steady her.

"That's Lizzie. She just showed up on the back steps one day and never left. I tried to find her family but didn't have any luck. Now she's part of *my* family. Isn't she cute?"

"Lizzie? As in my sister Lizzie?"

"She reminds me of her. She's such a good girl and she's so cute and cuddly."

"Whatever!" I replied as I mentally stuck my finger down my throat.

"Anyway, I'd better get going. Get some rest and take care of the rest of your animals. I'm sure they've been feeling neglected since Bubba went missing. I love you, Aunt Scar, and I'll see you tomorrow."

"There's something about tomorrow. Oh, now I remember. Can you take me to my attorney's office tomorrow? I need to go over some papers with him. I wouldn't impose, but since you're unemployed now, I figure you have more time than anyone else."

I did a double-take, not sure what to think of that last remark. I loved Aunt Scarlet with all my heart, but she was famous for blurting out whatever came to her mind.

"It would be my pleasure, Aunt Scar," I replied, mentally rolling my eyes as I quickly headed to the door.

CHAPTER 2

My ears were ringing, my head was pounding and as I struggled to free myself from some kind of restraint, fear gripped me like a vise. I had no idea where I was or what was happening to me. I felt drugged, fighting to open my eyes, unable to scream; unable to move. Suddenly, my eyes popped open, the cobwebs began to clear and clarity set in. I realized my phone was ringing, someone was banging on my front door, screaming my name, and the vice that held me was the tangled mess of bed sheets I had fallen into the night before.

"Lexi, I know you're in there! If you don't open this door I'm calling the police!"

What the hell? "I'm coming, Ma! Jeez, keep you're panties on!"

"Lexi!"

Crap, was that Nana? As a tirade in Italian followed, there was no doubt. Nana didn't speak much English, but I was almost certain she understood every word.

My annoyance was building as I struggled to free myself from my sheets. What the hell was my mother doing at my apartment so early in the morning, and how did she find it in the first place. In the six months I'd lived here, she'd never so much as asked my address.

"And would you please answer your damned phone? Your Aunt Scarlet has been trying to call you all morning. She said you were supposed to take her to her attorney's office."

Crap, crap, crap!

"Can you give me a minute to let you in?"

I was unlocking my door as the ranting continued.

"It's no wonder you can't keep a job, Lexi. You can't even get your lazy butt out of bed. It's after ten in the morning, for goodness sake. And why you ever quit; although I'll never understand why you took that zoo job in the first place. With all your computer skills, you should have looked for something in computers. You get that from your Aunt Scarlet, you know. She was a whiz with computers."

"Hi, Aunt Scar," I said as soon as I picked up the phone. "I'm so sorry. I must have overslept. I'm on my way."

"It's no wonder you can't find a job, Lexi."

"No lectures, Aunt Scar. Mom already beat you to it. I'm on my way," I replied as I hung up the phone and rubbed my forehead, massaging the headache that was already starting.

I headed toward my bathroom to splash water on my face, quickly brush my teeth and run a comb through my hair, discarding my flannies on the way.

"I've never known you to be irresponsible, Lexi. What's gotten into you?"

Without responding, I shut the bathroom door and readied myself to face the world. Back in my bedroom, I threw on jeans, sweatshirt and tennis shoes, pulled my hair up into a ponytail, slapped a baseball cap on my head and grabbed my keys.

"Gotta go, Ma. Lock up on your way out. There's an extra set of keys on the hook by the fridge. Love you both."

Before she could beat me up anymore, I was through the door and working my way to my car, praying it would start on the first try. Someone must have been looking out for me because just as I spied my mother on the landing, I was backing out of my driveway onto Grady, heading for Waters and the Veterans Expressway.

Twenty minutes later, and after a lot of deep breathing, I pulled into Aunt Scarlet's rutted drive.

I noticed Houty standing by the shed when I got out of my car, so I headed in his direction.

"Hey, Houty," I called. "Have you seen Bubba around? Aunt Scarlet's been worried about him."

Houty had been her handy man for the past five years or so. He was probably in his fifties; a little slow on the take, but a hell of a sweet guy.

"No, Miss Lexi. I ain't seen him nowheres. And Miss Scarlet, she's been worried sick! It jest ain't like him ta wander off. I'm afeard sumthin's wrong."

"I'll look for him again after I take Aunt Scarlet to her attorney. Good to see you again, Houty."

"Well, okay then, Miss Lexi."

He headed around the side of the shed and I started toward the house. Just as I reached the steps, Houty called out to me.

"Miss Lexi! Miss Lexi! Come quick!"

Something in his voice made my heart beat faster and as a rush of adrenaline swept through me, I turned and started running back. As I rounded the shed, I caught sight of Houty bending over what appeared to be a bloody mess of fur, half in and half out of the big hedge bordering the right side of the property.

"Oh, ma word, Miss Lexi! Who coulda did this? Poor Bubba! Looks like sumun's beat him haf ta death!"

I bent down and as I laid my hand on his back, I heard Bubba whimper. I could see he was in bad shape, unable to move and struggling to breathe.

"Houty, is that old pickup of yours still running?"

"Well, yesum. It shorely is."

"Go get it and bring it here alongside the shed, as close as you can get to Bubba."

"Well, okay then, Miss Lexi."

I began speaking softly to Bubba, gently running my hand over his body. He was covered in blood and in places I could see bone protruding from his fur. When I tenderly ran my fingers over a huge knot on his head, so swollen his eye was barely visible, he whimpered faintly and tried to pull away.

"I'm so sorry, Bubba," I said to him with tears streaming down my face. "We're going to get you to the vet and he'll fix you up good as new."

Houty parked the truck and came around to the other side of Bubba. Without saying a word, he gently placed his hands under one side of Bubba's shoulders as I slid mine under the other. Carefully, we inched him forward, out from under the hedge.

"Do you have a board big enough to lay him on so we can get him into the truck?"

"Yesum, I shorely do. Brung it with me. See?"

"You're such a kind man, Houty."

We painstakingly maneuvered Bubba onto the board and lifted him into the bed of the truck where Houty had already placed thick quilts to soften the ride.

"Do you know where Lakeshore Animal Hospital is?"

"Yesum, I shorely do. Been there bunches a times."

"Can we get there without going past the house? I don't want Aunt Scarlet to see Bubba in this condition. It would break her heart."

"Well, yesum. We can go by way a tha 'ole house."

The 'old house', as he called it, was a trailer Aunt Scarlet had lived in while her house was being built. It sat back in a clearing near the opposite edge of the property. Houty occupied it now, but never referred to it as his place.

"Let's get moving then."

Houty, white knuckled, eyebrows furrowed and mouth pursed, drove five miles an hour, trying to avoid the potholes.

Gushing tears, overwrought with anxiety and fear, it took every fiber of my being not to reach over with my left leg and stomp on the gas, but I knew Bubba would suffer for my impatience. I couldn't comprehend why anyone would harm him. He was such a sweet, dopey, lovable animal.

Neither of us spoke all the way there, each with our own thoughts, horrified by what we had just seen; praying that Bubba would survive the trip.

When we finally turned onto Gunn Highway, it was a matter of minutes and we were pulling into the parking lot of the animal hospital. Before the truck stopped, I jumped out and ran inside, nearly colliding with a customer.

"I'm so sorry," I blabbered as I ran toward the counter. "Is Dr. Lehman here?" I yelled to no one in particular. "It's Bubba. I need help!"

As Dr. Lehman rounded the corner, I grabbed his arm. "Dr. Lehman, come quick! It's Bubba. He's hurt real bad!" I shouted, tugging him toward the door. My knees began to buckle and I gripped his jacket, nearly ripping it off as I tried to stay upright. "Please, Dr. Lehman, help us!"

"Calm down, Lexi. Let me have a look. David! Barry! Get up here!" he bellowed.

We all rushed out the door toward the truck, nearly knocking each other down as we went through the opening. My knees were shaking, afraid of what we would find when we rounded the cab, but when Dr. Lehman saw Bubba, the look on his face scared me even more.

"Get the gurney! Now!" Dr. Lehman demanded, and as David sprinted back inside, he laid his hand on Bubba, expertly working his fingers over his mangled body. He began to speak softly to me, telling me he would do everything he could to make Bubba comfortable.

I was speechless. Stunned. Did I hear him right? Did I truly understand the implication? Surely I was confused. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

As they carefully lifted Bubba onto the gurney and rolled him inside, I just stood there, unable to move.

Houty sat in the cab of the truck and for the first time I saw tears marking their way down his cheeks.

Suck it up, Lexi! Put on a brave face and get your ass in there. And don't leave Houty out here by himself!

I did a mental face slap, squared my shoulders, wiped away my tears and opened the cab door.

"Houty, why don't you come in with me and we'll see how Bubba's doing."

"Well, okay then, Miss Lexi."

Houty exited the cab, and together, arm in arm, we entered the hospital.

"Can anyone tell us how Bubba's doing?" I asked the first person I saw.

"He's in surgery right now. Poor Bubba, he's such a sweet thing. Dr. Lehman said to cancel his appointments for the rest of the day, so I suspect we won't know anything for a while. We have a nice waiting room for the families with TV and a DVD player. You can wait in there if you'd like. I'll let you know as soon as he's out."

Just then my cell phone began to chirp and excusing myself, I walked outside. As soon as I flipped it open Aunt Scarlet's name appeared. Crap!

"Hi, Aunt Scar," I said into the phone.

"Lexi! Where are you? Your car's been outside for thirty minutes."

"Sorry, Aunt Scar. Houty wanted to show me something so I took a little ride with him." Well, it wasn't exactly a lie.

"I thought you were going to take me to my attorney. Now here you are out gallivanting around with Houty! If you didn't want to take me you should have just said so. And I thought you were going to look for Bubba again today, too. He still hasn't come home, you know."

"I *am* Aunt Scar." I'm going to burn in hell, I thought. "And I *am* going to take you to your attorney. I didn't know it was an emergency. Just let me finish up with Houty and I'll be right there."

I hung up before she could browbeat me anymore and headed back into the hospital.

"Houty, I need you to take me back to Aunt Scarlet's," I said as soon as I saw him. "Then, if you could come back here and wait for Dr. Lehman to come out, I would really appreciate it. I'm going to give you my cell phone number. After you talk to him I'd like you to call me. Do you think you could do that?"

"Well, Miss Lexi, I spose I could. Would ya like me ta call Miss Scarlet, too?"

"No! I'll take care of that," I said in a semi-panicked voice. I grabbed a pen and a business card from the counter and wrote my number on the backside. As I slid it into his shirt pocket, I grabbed his arm and started moving him toward the door.

On the way back to Aunt Scarlet's, I was debating with myself when and how I was going to tell her about Bubba, but before I could make up my mind we were pulling into her drive.

I jumped out before he could make a complete stop, urging him to turn around and head back before Aunt Scarlet could stop him. His truck was almost out of sight when she appeared on the porch.

"Where's he off to now?" Aunt Scarlet exclaimed, throwing her skinny arms into the air. "I asked him to trim the hedges this

morning and he takes off traipsing around with you. This just isn't like him. You're a bad influence, Lexi."

"Jeez, Aunt Scar, give me a break. Houty wanted to show *me* something. Anyway, I'm here now, so let's go."

"Well, just so you know, I'm disappointed in you, Lexi. I always thought I could depend on you."

Oh brother. That was a low blow.

CHAPTER 3

"Hi, Mary Lou," Aunt Scarlet called out as we entered the lobby of her attorney's office. "Is Roland in?"

"Hi there, Miss Carducci. How y'all doin? And who's this pretty little thing?" she drawled.

"This is Lexi, my niece. She's the reason I'm late, so don't be dishing out any compliments," she replied, trying to hide a smile.

That was the thing about Aunt Scarlet. She didn't stay mad very long. And I already liked this Mary Lou. Pretty *and* little. She could give out compliments like that all day and it would be just fine with me.

"Just let me tell him you're here," Mary Lou replied, displaying a big grin.

Roland entered the lobby with a man I thought I recognized, saw Aunt Scarlet and proceeded to give her a bear hug.

"Roland, for goodness sake, let me go!"

"I was wondering what happened to you," he said, releasing his hold. "I expected you much earlier."

"Sorry for the inconvenience, Roland," she answered, giving me a formidable look. "I just need a few minutes of your time."

"Come right in. You know I always have time for you."

"Lexi, wait right here. I'll only be a minute."

As she followed him into his office, I heard, "Lexi? Lexi O'Malley?"

I turned around to the sound of his voice as he continued.

"I thought you looked familiar. Nick Romano. We used to hang out when we were kids. Your aunt would pick up the whole gang

and take us to her lake house in the summer. You broke my arm when we were kids. Remember?"

"Well, I'll be damned. Nicky Romano," I replied with a smile. "I remember. And by the way, your arm was an accident. Although I have to say, paybacks are hell. You shouldn't have scared the crap out of me, literally, with your little story about piranhas in the lake."

"Hey, we were kids. But I've always known you were the one who frayed the rope on that tire swing. If you remember, it was you who dared me to see who could swing the farthest out over the lake, and then you goaded me into going first."

"Believe what you want."

"So, what have you been up to?" he asked.

"This and that. How about you?"

"In my grown up life I'm a P.I.. I even have my own firm. Romano Investigations. And I came up with the name all by myself."

"Oh, goody," I exclaimed, clasping my hands and giving him a sarcastic look.

"You haven't changed a bit, Lexi. Still the smart-ass I remember. Although you do fill out those jeans pretty good."

"And you're still the moron I remember," I snapped back.

"So, what are you doing now? For a living, I mean."

"I'm sort of in-between jobs right now," I said defensively, my ego a little bruised.

"What do you do when you're not in-between jobs?"

"I work with computer software; do some programming."

"If you're ever interested in making some money while you're looking, I could use some help. I do a lot of work for Roland. What I need doesn't require any knowledge or experience," he said, and then kind of chuckled. "That didn't come out exactly

right. What I meant was...what I would need you to do doesn't...the kind of work...uh, what do you think?"

"What do I think, what?" I said laughing. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You know, I always did get tongue-tied around you. Guess nothing ever changes; no matter how much time has passed," he replied, trying hard not to laugh too loud himself.

When we finally composed ourselves he continued.

"I've got a stinker of a case right now that I need some help with. This guy I'm investigating is slick. He has a workers' comp case. Says he hurt his back and he finally found a doctor who says he's permanently disabled. I've had one of my investigators try to get next to him. He's a good ol' boy; likes to hunt and fish, bowl, plays with those paint ball things and so on. Mark, my investigator, didn't have any problem befriending him, but the guy wasn't biting when it came to any activities. Always said he couldn't because he had a hurt back."

"Sounds like you've got a problem. Did you ever stop to think that maybe he does have a hurt back?"

"That's a possibility, but my gut says no. I just have to approach him from a different angle. That's where you would come in. I mean, what guy in his right mind could resist a fox like you?"

"You say the sweetest things," I said with a smirk. "So, you're saying you want me to seduce the guy?"

"Not exactly seduce. Just make nice. Try to get him to help you move some furniture or do some handy work, or anything that would prove he's not disabled."

"And how, exactly, am I supposed to do that?"

"Use your imagination...and charm, if you have any. With your looks it shouldn't be too hard, although I would ditch the hat.

Anyway, he goes to the same bar every Tuesday night. Just maneuver yourself next to him on a bar stool and make friends. Surely you know how to do that."

"And what if he doesn't take the bait?"

"Then I'll move on to plan C."

Just then I heard Aunt Scarlet's voice as she and Roland entered the lobby.

"I see you've made friends, Lexi. Now, isn't this nice."

"Aunt Scar, this is Nicky Romano. You used to bring us to the lake to go swimming in the summer when we were kids. Remember?"

"Yes, of course. Nicky Romano. Aren't you the one that Lexi caused to get his arm broken on one of those outings?"

"Yes, ma'am; that was me," he replied with a mischievous grin.

And here I was starting to like you, I thought. What a weasel. And what was up with Aunt Scarlet? She was supposed to be on my side!

"But if you hadn't made her crap her suit with that story about piranhas, I suspect she would never have frayed that rope. I've always been a firm believer in what goes around comes around. I hope you've changed now that you're all grown up," Aunt Scarlet continued in a scolding tone.

"We better get going, Aunt Scar," I said, feeling vindicated.

"I need to check on Houty."

"Howdy? As is Doody?" Nick asked with that shit-eating grin still on his face.

"And you accused me of being a smart-ass. It's H-O-U-T-Y," I spelled. "Short for Houton. He's Aunt Scarlet's handy man."

"Lexi, I thought you were going to look for Bubba this afternoon?"

"I am, Aunt Scar, but I thought you were worried about Houty, too?" I said quickly, trying to cover my slip-up.

"Don't worry about Houty. He's a grown man. I need you to find Bubba. He's a helpless animal and I'm worried something's happened to him."

"Let's go then," I said, steering her toward the door. "It was good to see you again, Nick."

"Here's my card, Lexi. Call me if you're interested. And Miss Carducci, it was a pleasure seeing you again. You too, Lexi. I'm looking forward to hearing from you."

"What was that about, Lexi? Interested in what?" Aunt Scarlet asked as we pulled onto Ashley Street.

"Oh nothing, Aunt Scar. He just offered me some work, but I don't know. I have to think about it."

"What kind of work?"

"He's a private investigator and he wants me to help with a case. Just some research."

"That sounds like fun, Lexi. I'd love to tell my bridge club that my niece is a private investigator!"

"Not a private investigator, Aunt Scar. He just wants me to do some research."

"Semantics. Anyway, it's a job and you don't have one. What's it pay?"

"We didn't get that far. And besides, I don't know if I want to do it. And what about Bubba? I thought you were hell bent on me searching for him."

"I am, and as soon as you find him I think you should contact Nicky. Jobs aren't a dime a dozen you know. And it could turn out to be just the thing you've been looking for. Your computer skills would come in handy in research, and who knows, it could add some excitement to your life."

My life is plenty exciting, I thought as I mentally braced myself.

"Aunt Scar, I found Bubba this morning," I suddenly blurted. "He was not in good shape. Houty and I took him to Lakeshore Animal Hospital. Houty's there, waiting to talk to Dr. Lehman when he comes out of surgery."

"Surgery? What happened? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm so sorry, Aunt Scar. I just...I didn't want you to see him like that. Then I couldn't find the right words, or the right time. And I wanted to hear from Houty before..."

"Take me to Dr. Lehman, right now! I can't believe you, Lexi. You know how worried I've been. I knew in my heart something happened to him; knew he would come home if he could. He's never just disappeared."

"I know, Aunt Scar. I wish I weren't the one who had to tell you, and I wish this had never happened. But it did and we have to deal with it," I said as I turned the car around and headed toward the Veterans.

Halfway there my cell phone began ringing and as soon as I flipped it open I saw it was the hospital.

"Have you talked to Dr. Lehman yet?" I asked, assuming it was Houty.

"Well yes, Miss Lexi, I shorely did. He said Bubba was holdin' on, but that was about all. Said we would know more in a couple a days. He said they would take real good care a him and that he would personally call Miss Scarlet as soon as he had ana news. Said I should go home. Do you think I should go home, Miss Lexi?"

"Yes, Houty, I think that's a good idea. We're on our way there right now. Thank you so much for everything."

"Well, you're jest so welcome, Miss Lexi. Anathin else I can do, you jest let me know. Okay?"

"Okay, Houty," I replied as I closed the phone and laid it on the seat.

"Well?" Aunt Scarlet asked, her voice trembling with suppressed anger. "What did he say?"

"He said Bubba came through the surgery and was holding his own. He just needs to rest now," I replied, putting a positive spin on Houty's words, saying a silent prayer that Dr. Lehman would do the same.

We pulled into the lot and before I could put the car in park, Aunt Scarlet jumped out and raced inside. I caught up just as Dr. Lehman joined her.

"Scarlet, I'm so sorry," he said, embracing her.

"Thank you, Adam," Aunt Scarlet said through her tears. "How is he? Houty said he just needs to rest. Is that the truth?"

"We're hoping for the best, Scarlet, but we'll know more in a few days. Why don't you go home and I'll call you as soon he wakes up. There's really nothing you can do until then."

"Oh, I didn't realize he was sleeping. I guess I could freshen up and give Houty instructions for the rest of my pets. I'll bring a bag. Do you still have a room I could stay in?"

"Yes, I do. And take your time. Bubba will be out for a while yet."

As we pulled onto Gunn Highway, I handed Aunt Scarlet a tissue from the box between the seats and as she dabbed at her tears I could think of no words of comfort, so we rode to her house in silence. When we pulled in her drive Houty was waiting by the front steps.

"Miss Scarlet, I'm so sorry," he began as she stepped out of the car.

"Thank you, Houty. I'll be at the hospital for a few days, so I need to give you some instructions on taking care of my pets while I'm gone," Aunt Scarlet said in a determined voice. "And

Lexi, I need you to take Lizzie. She's just a kitten and Houty won't be able to keep up with her and do the rest of his chores."

My instinct was to protest. As much as I wanted to help, I had no place for a kitten or any idea how to take care of one.

"Whatever you need, Aunt Scar," I said quickly, before I had the chance to wimp out.

"Houty, find Lizzie and get the cat carrier and the extra litter out of the shed," she said as she gathered food and kitty toys, putting them by the front door. "Lexi, you'll have to stop and get a litter box on your way home. You have to clean it out every day or she won't use it and you don't want kitty urine in your carpet."

Jeez, I thought, kitty urine? I have a hard time just keeping my apartment clean. How am I supposed to find time to clean out a litter box every day?

"I put Lizzie on yer back seat and tha bag a litter in yer trunk," Houty said when he returned. "But Miss Lexi, you better go slow. If she falls off you'll loose her fer sure through tha hole in yer floor."

"It's okay, Houty; I'll move her to the front. Then we won't have to worry," I said as I began to pick up the things Aunt Scarlet had set aside and hand them to Houty.

"Can you put these in the trunk for me, too?"

"Yesum, I shorely can."

"Lexi, I need you to come by and check on the house every day," she said once he was outside. "Make sure Houty's taking care of my pets and that he doesn't need anything."

"No problem, Aunt Scar. Now, why don't you get cleaned up and get your things packed so I can take you back to the hospital."

"No need. Houty can take me. Just make sure you take good care of Lizzie, and don't forget to check on things while I'm away."

"Don't give it a second thought. You can count on me," I said almost convincingly as I started toward the door. "I love you, Aunt Scar. Call me as soon as you know anything."

CHAPTER 4

By the time I got home and lugged everything upstairs it was nearly dark and I was exhausted and hungry. I hadn't eaten anything all day and my stomach was beginning to protest. I opened the fridge, hoping the food fairies had stocked up for me, but all I saw were two lonely Budweiser's; a testament to my domestic goddess skills. My eyes began to wander toward the bag of kitty food just as my phone rang. My caller ID told me it was Darcy, my best friend since birth. In fact, our parents still lived across the street from one another.

"Hey, Darce. What's up?"

"Not much. I was going to grab a bite to eat and thought you might like to join me."

"I think you just saved my life. I'm starving!"

"Pick you up in a few."

"Oh, crap!" I exclaimed, suddenly remembering the kitten. "Sorry, Darce, I better not. I've sort of got a situation here."

"I know I'm going to regret this, but what situation?"

"I'm supposed to be taking care of Aunt Scarlet's kitten and I'm not sure what to do. I've got litter and a box that Aunt Scarlet tells me I have to clean out every day or the kitten will pee on my carpet. How am I supposed to clean it out? Do I just dump it and fill it back up? Aunt Scarlet didn't give me enough litter for that. And she gave me two kinds of kitty food, but how much do I give her? And can I leave her alone? Where will she sleep? And do I have to give her a bath?"

"Damn, Lexi, I don't know what's gotten into you since you were laid off that miserable job you'd hated for the past seven

years, but the take charge gal I remember got lost and has been replaced by a wuss."

"Bite me!"

"Well shit, it's just a damn kitten. Shoot me if I'm ever desperate enough to ask you to keep my kids."

"Besides, it wasn't the job I hated. I love programming. Well, maybe love is a little over the top, but the clincher was the twenty seven whiney, sniveling, bitchy prima donnas I had to supervise."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever."

"Listen, Darce, you've got cats...and kids, and dogs. Help me out here. I'm serious."

"I'll be right there," she sighed, hanging up.

While I waited, I opened a Budweiser, took a long swig, then unpacked everything and set it on the kitchen counter. I was contemplating whether or not to let Lizzie out of the kitty carrier when it suddenly dawned on me that I hadn't heard a peep from her. As I got down on my knees to peer inside the cage, Darcy came through the door.

"She's not going to bite you, Lexi. Let her out for crissake."

"Quit busting my ass! What do you think I'm doing down here on my knees?"

As I opened the door and looked inside I could see her cowering at the far end of the cage. Darcy's right. I am a wuss, I thought.

"Come here, Lizzie. It's okay. No one's going to hurt you."

"Did I hear you right? Lizzie? Damn, Aunt Scarlet really has a wicked sense of humor," she said as she reached in and pulled Lizzie out with one hand.

She cuddled the kitten against her neck, rubbing her back and making cooing sounds.

"She's a sweet little thing," she said as she handed her to me. "Just put her up against your chest and let her cuddle. She's scared."

I did what I was told as Darcy filled the litter box and put it on the kitchen floor.

"I'm glad to see you got a pooper scooper. Tomorrow, and every day, just scoop up the pee and poop, put it in a plastic bag and throw it away. You shouldn't have to put more litter in for about a week. This clumpable stuff is the shit!"

I was worrying about the pee and poop as she opened a can of kitty food, put half of it on a plate and set it on the floor.

"Give her the other half in the morning. You can keep some dry food out all the time. She'll only eat when she's hungry. That's the stuff in the bag," she said sarcastically as she placed a bowl of water beside the food.

"Okay, smart-ass. So I'm a little kitty care challenged," I laughed as I set Lizzie down in front of the food. She cautiously sniffed at it, backed away and sat on her haunches, then went back to it and began to eat.

"You can leave her alone, she'll sleep where she wants and you don't have to bathe her. She'll clean herself."

"Thanks, Darce. I owe you."

"Can we please go eat now?"

"I don't know. It's her first night in a strange place. I'm not sure I should leave her alone."

"Lexi, you're a pain in the ass," she said annoyed. I hoped it was because she was hungry. She could get pretty testy when she hadn't eaten.

"We could just order a pizza and stay in," I replied. "My treat, although I'll have to go get some beer. I only have one and everyone knows you can't have pizza without beer."

"You order and I'll go get the beer," she groaned, grabbing her keys.

After I ordered the pizza I put my purchases in the pantry, kicked off my shoes, and keeping one eye on Lizzie, set out paper and plastic and turned on the TV.

Thirty minutes later, with Lizzie curled up in my lap, we were enjoying our first bite of pizza when the phone rang. What the hell could Houty possibly want at ten P.M., I thought as I picked up.

"Hey, Houty."

"Oh ma word, Miss Lexi! You gotta come quick! I stopped by Miss Scarlet's ta check on things afore turnin' in fer tha night and sumun was in her house! As soon as I lit the place up he run outa there like it was on fire! Almost knocked me right down. Scared me so bad I nearly wet ma drawers! And he made such a big mess. Miss Scarlet's gonna be so upset. What should I do? Should I call the police?"

"Yes, Houty, call the police. I'll be right there."

"Police? What's up?" Darcy asked.

"Someone broke into Aunt Scarlet's house. I've got to go. You want to tag along?"

"Fuckin' A!"

"Good. You can drive. Your car's a little more reliable than mine," I said as I grabbed my keys.

"Oh, now it's okay to leave the kitten by herself. I see where I fall in the friendship chain."

"Crap! I forgot about Lizzie," I said as I scooped her up. "Grab that cat carrier, would you?"

We could see the lights as soon as we pulled onto the dirt road leading to Aunt Scarlet's house. It was lit up like a

Christmas tree. I saw Houty from the car, standing on the front porch, wringing his hands. There were no police cars in sight, so I surmised they either hadn't arrived yet or Houty hadn't called.

"Did you call the police?" I asked as I approached the house.

"Well, I was gonna, Miss Lexi, but I dint know tha number. I figered you could do it when ya got here. Just look at tha mess he made! Miss Scarlet's gonna be so upset."

"Don't worry about it, Houty. We'll clean everything up before she gets home," I said as I walked into the house. And what a chore that's going to be, I thought, taking in the damage that had been done. In the living room, everything had been thrown into the middle of the floor. Couch cushions had been ripped apart, broken glass was strewn about from her shattered knick-knacks; even the curtains had been ripped from the windows and flung into the pile.

As I gingerly made my way to the kitchen, I noticed all the cabinet doors were wide open and all the drawers had been yanked out and were lying in the middle of the floor, their contents scattered everywhere. Houty was right. Aunt Scarlet would be devastated. Even I didn't want to see the rest of the house.

I took a deep breath as my outrage set in. Who would do such a thing? Aunt Scarlet was a sweetheart. She wouldn't hurt a fly. And she certainly didn't have anything of value that I knew of. But it was obvious someone was looking for something and it was obvious they were mad, judging from the horrendous destruction.

"Holy Shit!" I heard as Darcy came through the door. "This place is a disaster!"

Glancing up, I noticed a magnet on the fridge with emergency numbers in big, bold, red letters. I immediately wondered why Houty had lied, then mentally smacked myself in the head for

being suspicious. I knew in my heart that Houty loved Aunt Scarlet and would do anything for her. He probably hadn't even come into the kitchen, I rationalized. I took another deep breath, picked up the phone and dialed the number for the police.

It took another twenty minutes for them to arrive and since I felt this overwhelming need to start cleaning up, we waited on the front porch. I had seen enough detective shows to keep my hands to myself until the police went through the crime scene.

"Are you Miss O'Malley?" one of the officers asked, looking at me as he walked up the steps. My auburn hair and green eyes must have been the giveaway. Darcy was Jewish, with black, shoulder-length hair, a protruding nose and prominent, widely open, large-lidded brown eyes.

"Yes, sir," I answered.

"I'm Officer Clark and this is my partner, Officer Valentini. Says here you reported a break in?"

"Yes, I did. This is my Aunt Scarlet's house and she asked me and Houty," I said pointing to him, "to check on things while she was away. Houty's Aunt Scarlet's handy man and lives close by. He came over tonight to make sure everything was locked up and as soon as he turned the lights on someone came tearing out of the house, almost knocking him down. He was so frightened he didn't get a good look at the person. He thinks it was a man, though. And when he went inside, well, come see for yourself. I don't know, at this point, what you'll be able to do, but we didn't touch anything."

The two Officers stepped into the house, and as I followed, I couldn't help but admire the way Valentini's pants hugged his ass.

"Jesus! Someone was sure angry," Officer Clark exclaimed.

"That was my first thought, too. But my second was who? Aunt Scarlet's a sweet old lady who doesn't bother anyone, and to my knowledge, she doesn't have anything anyone would want. To tell you the truth, I'm baffled. I mean, she can be a little abrupt at times and she tends to spout out whatever comes to her mind, but what old lady doesn't? None I know. So what was he after? And why was he so mad?"

"We may never know. It could have just been a drugged up teen looking for some quick cash. We'll try to get some fingerprints and run them through the system, but I wouldn't get my hopes up. These things are usually random and if whoever did this has never been arrested, well, we don't have much else to go on."

"Oh crap, in all the excitement I almost forgot. Houty found Bubba, one of Aunt Scarlet's dogs, this morning by the hedge. Someone had beaten him nearly to death. And I don't mean just hit him. He was all bloody, he had bones protruding from his fur in numerous places, and a big knot on his head that was so swollen it closed one of his eyes. As soon as we got him to the hospital the vet took him into surgery. It was really, really bad. That's why Aunt Scarlet isn't here. She's staying at the animal hospital until she can bring him home. I hope."

"I'm sorry for all your trouble," Officer Clark said. "That certainly adds a new twist. I bet, somehow, the two incidents are related."

"What is Howdy's last name?" Officer Valentini asked, pencil poised, staring down at his pad, barley able to control his mirth. "I need it for the report."

"It's Wentworth, Houton. H-O-U-T-O-N," I spelled, hoping he got the inference and biting my lip to keep from smiling myself.

"And your first name, Miss O'Malley?"

"Alexis. Do you need me to spell that, too?" I asked, trying to hide my amusement.

"I think I've got it. And your other friend's name?"

Darcy," I answered, hesitating.

"And Darcy's last name?"

As I began to giggle, Darcy spoke up.

"It's Farcey. F-A-R-C-E-Y," she spelled. "Lexi, you're so lame," she said as all three of us began to laugh out loud.

"I told her not to marry that jackass," I said, barely able to spit it out between giggles.

As Valentini tried to compose himself, Clark headed toward the bedroom, clearing his throat as he went.

"But you know how it is when you're in heat," I continued.

"Yes, ma'am, I do," he responded, melting me with his sensuous brown eyes. Jeez, a girl could get lost in those eyes, I thought, as I began to feel tingly all over.

"Trouble was, so did all the nurses at the hospital. So now they're divorced, but she's stuck with the stupid name because of her kids."

"At least it's an attention getter. Not boring, like Mary Jones or Jane Doe. And it can sure lighten a mood."

"Thank you," Darcy said, giving me a smug look. "You're the first person to ever put a positive spin on it. I like you already, and I don't usually take to most people right away."

"You're welcome. I'll need to get the rest of your information; addresses and phone numbers," he said, looking at me.

As I recited our addresses, I noticed his characters were all squiggly, no doubt from his suppressed humor, but I had to give him credit. He was doing a pretty good job of maintaining his professional demeanor under the circumstances.

"Now, Lexi is it? Why don't you show me where you found the dog this morning?"

We started making our way to the door when Clark called out to Valentini.

"Tony, call the crime scene techs and get them out here. We're going to need pictures of all this. They can take the fingerprints, too, and maybe find something we missed."

"Darce, it's going to be a long night," I said. "Why don't you go home? I'll catch a ride with Houty. And I'm really sorry about dinner."

"Are you kidding? This is the most excitement I've had in the millennium."

"But don't you have clients in the morning?"

"Nope. I'm off tomorrow. And Greg has the kids. His new play thing, 'Lindsey', I think her name is," she said, putting the word Lindsey in finger quotes, "says the kids need some culture, so they took them to the theatre tonight and he's keeping them for the rest of the week. So I'm all yours through the duration."

"Great! So when all these guys are out of here, you can help us put the place back together."

I sent Houty home around two A.M. and Darcy and I yawned through the next hour. By the time everyone finished up we were so exhausted we decided to pack it in ourselves, figuring we'd start fresh in the morning.

