



A
Matty Cruz
Adventure
Book One



ASTRAY
IN
COUPER

R. MARQUEZ

Astray in Couper

By R.Marquez

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This book contains excerpts from the forthcoming titles *The Devil Lies in Couper* and *Matty Cruz Mysteries 1,2,3* by R.Marquez. These excerpts have been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming editions.

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This novel is a work of fiction. Names, events, places, characters, incidents, and businesses are either products of the Author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. As such all characters, are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. The entire city of Couper, though inspired by Pacific Northwest geography, is fictitious and any resemblance to actual cities in that region or anywhere in the world is purely coincidental.

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Description

When the economic downturn ends Matty Cruz's corporate career, she impulsively moves to Couper, Washington, a tree-filled city nestled on the banks of the Columbia River. Unbeknownst to her, the charming town has one of the highest violent-crime rates in the Pacific Northwest.

In the first **Matty Cruz Adventure**, a depressed and broke Matty entertains herself by reading news stories detailing the mayhem that occurred the night before in her neighborhood, until one of those stories ends up on her doorstep in the form of a soot-covered dog.

She soon discovers the heinous crime that lies behind the dog's abandonment and realizes that it is up to her to save them both from Couper's ever encroaching dark side.

Other Books by the Author

Killer in Couper

Redhead in Couper

The Devil Lies in Couper

The Couper Vendetta

Box Set: Matty Cruz Adventures 1,2,3

Tales from Couper, Short Story Collection

Coming later in 2015

The Couper Conundrum

To be notified when more books are released by the author
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Dedication

*To my friends, Shelley and Cliff Piel, who restarted me
on my writing adventure.*

Prologue

The flames played in Agnes Whitshaw's old eyes as she watched the flowered paper shrivel and fall off the walls. She looked up and saw the smoke detector melting silently on the ceiling. Her eyes gleamed, and her lips twisted into a toothless and terrible grin. *You want me dead that much?*

The fire crept toward her from the living room. She could hear pieces of her house burning and falling like logs in a hearth. Agnes covered her mouth and nose with the collar of her nightgown before leaving the bedroom. She fell to the ground, catching herself with the heels of her hands. The fire snapped behind her, and somewhere a dog whimpered, but she kept crawling toward the backdoor. When Agnes reached it, she wrapped her fingers with the hem of her singed gown and tried to turn the burning knob, but the door was locked shut.

You think you outsmarted me? Her hands felt around the bottom of the door until she located the small opening they hadn't thought to block. Something wet touched her cheek, and if she had ever known what tenderness was, she might have caressed it. Instead, with her remaining strength, she shoved the one good thing in her life outside the flaming house. *I win.*

The cool air from the outside rushed in and touched the woman's face, giving her one last moment of relief, before it fed the waiting blaze behind her. The inferno

roared and she flew backward, into perdition.

One

Wait a minute,” Matty Cruz said, her voice raspy from disuse. “You shorted him.”

The cashier frowned at the middle-aged woman who stood behind the old man at the counter. The dimly lit interior of the Saxon Gas and Mini Mart sat empty except for the two customers and the tattooed gas-station employee.

The man had asked for a Washington Lotto ticket and paid for it with a ten-dollar bill.

The clerk dropped the ticket on the counter along with eight singles.

When the cashier didn’t immediately correct his mistake, Matty wondered if he intended to cheat the purchaser. She spoke again, more loudly. “You owe him another dollar, mister.”

The tattooed man swallowed hard, and, with more bared teeth than a smile, said, “You’re right.” He reached back into the cash drawer, pulled out another bill, and placed it next to the others. “Sorry, Gabe.”

“My gosh, I didn’t even notice.” The older man picked up his change and tucked it into the pocket of his frayed coat. “Wonder how many times you’ve done that to me before, Clyde. Maybe I need to take my business elsewhere.” Gabe turned to face Matty and smiled with stained teeth. “Thank you, miss. Every dollar counts, you know.”

Matty couldn't avoid his breath: cigarettes and stale beer. She tried not to show her distaste and nodded a brief acknowledgement, then turned to study the beef jerky displayed near the register. The fellow made his way slowly out the store, stopping to give an old Camaro, parked in front, a hard rap with his fist.

The cashier muttered something Matty couldn't hear. She stepped up to the counter. "Pump four, please."

He looked her up and down through narrowed eyes, taking in her black sweats and tennis shoes. He snorted and punched a few keys on the register and gave Matty her change.

Matty looked at the money.

"It's all there," the cashier said in a surly voice.

She pushed the bills and coins into her purse.

"In the future, mind your own business," he said.

"You want me to pretend I didn't see you try to cheat that man?" Matty shot back. Their eyes held for a moment before he turned away.

Matty walked out feeling unsettled. This was the first time in over a week that she had ventured out for food and gas, and it resulted in a confrontation with someone. She looked heavenward at the cloud-filled sky and drizzling rain that seemed omnipresent in the Pacific Northwest. Not that she minded it—the grayness matched her mood. It was dealing with these Couperites, so different from the people she knew back in California. No

wonder she preferred to remain solitary. At least, that was what she told herself.

During the short drive back to her home, the rain ceased and patches of blue appeared in the sky, which meant that the temperature would drop several degrees. Her realtor had warned Matty that autumn was much colder here than in California. It was also much more spectacular, with a variety of deciduous trees and bushes, wrapped in their yellow, red, and orange foliage. She still marveled at the tall trees that framed so many of the roads—it was as if someone dropped Couper, with its houses, stores, and roads, into a forest. The location of her new hometown had once been a canopy of Douglas fir, maple, and White Oak that swept to the banks of the Columbia River. The natural beauty of Southwest Washington played a major factor in Matty's decision to retreat—or rot—here.

She turned left onto her street. The neighborhood, very different from her previous one, was a mix of new and old homes, some kept up and others not. Her wheel hit a rut, and the car bounced. *Damn, I need to be more careful.* Couper, at least the part she could afford to live in, didn't have its roads maintained like those in the California suburb she'd called home for twenty-five years.

After today's shopping trip at the Save-a-Lot, a local market Matty had found near her new home, she could stay put for another week or two, which suited her

fine. She preferred to spend the majority of her days lying on the couch wearing her robe and slippers with the television playing softly in the background. After moving to Couper, she had given herself permission to recover from the last tumultuous year. She thought this would take a few days, but the days had stretched into weeks, and except for the minimum effort needed to maintain some vestige of civilized living, she still spent most of the time on the sofa. A tiny part of her wanted to climb out of her funk, but the rest of her remained paralyzed after losing her career, her mother—everything she valued in life.

Once parked in her driveway, Matty carefully checked the front of her home, a modest green dwelling built in the Craftsman style popular in the region. A slanted black roof topped plank-sided walls and a small porch with two wood and brick pillars. The front kitchen window gave her a view of older homes and the much-patched street. This part of Couper was struggling to make the transition between rural outskirts to suburbia. She'd poured a significant bit of her savings into the place, which began to plunge in value immediately after she signed the papers buying it. Not that it mattered, she wasn't going anywhere, and a roof over her head was her number one priority.

From her car, Matty surveyed her lawn and plant beds. Small weeds pushed out from under the mulch. She sighed. She couldn't afford a gardener here, and she

would have to deal with them herself. The constant gentle rain, two hundred days a year she read, made everything grow almost non-stop, except during the winter. She scanned for trash discarded by careless passersby, the façade of the house for any thrown-egg damage, and the porch for unpleasant surprises from the neighbors. They hadn't taken to an out-of-stater moving onto their turf, and some had expressed their displeasure in disturbing ways. *They can do their damndest. I'm not going anywhere.*

Her eyes caught a dark lump by her front door. *Oh no, not again.* Her stomach tightened, remembering a dead possum posed on her doorstep a few days after she moved in. Matty's spine stiffened. Whatever gift the neighborhood hoodlums had given her this time, she would deal with it. Nothing they dished out could make her to leave—she had no other place to go. Matty had chosen to make her last stand in Couper, and here she'd stay. She turned off the car's ignition, and marched over to the porch.

A small animal lay panting on her doormat. It was covered in soot, as if it had rolled around in ashes. The pathetic creature slowly wagged a blackened tail. It opened its dark eyes, peered up at Matty, and gave a desperate little bark. Matty gazed up and down the street, hoping someone would come running over and claim the poor thing, but the street remained quiet and deserted, except for the wind blowing the multi-colored leaves across the road.

She bent over to examine the dog. It wore a charred and ratty collar around its neck. The owner's contact information was probably on it. Matty reached for it, and the pooch licked her hand.

Matty pulled away. She had very little experience with animals, never having owned a pet. Should she say something to it to keep it friendly? "Ah—nice doggy."

She looked closely at the leather band. A lumpy piece of darkened plastic was fused onto it, but there was no tag. Perhaps the dog's owner had written on the inside of the strap. Once she turned it over, she could read, in faded black marker, the letter P, followed by a long smear mark. Matty then made out the letter Y. A second word was an indecipherable squiggle. *That was helpful.*

Matty wiped her hand on a tissue that she dug out of her jacket pocket and frowned at her uninvited visitor. Was this another present from the neighborhood hooligans? Or had something else led to a dog being abandoned on her porch?

Matty pursed her lips. She recalled reading a news article that morning about a fire close by. Hadn't it mentioned a missing dog?

The one activity she maintained from her previous life was skimming the news on the Internet every morning after breakfast. The headlines from her new hometown were much more brow lifting than those from her former suburb. Upon moving to Couper, she discovered that the

city experienced double the crime rate compared to her old neighborhood. Every morning, appalled and fascinated, she read all the tales of mayhem from the night before. In her haste to relocate, she hadn't seen beyond Couper's peaceful exterior. Fires, murders, home invasions, robberies, drugs—Couper suffered from them all. She should have done her own research instead of accepting the reassurances of a local policeman she met when she accidentally crossed the I-5 Bridge into Washington State a couple of years back during a business trip. *Too late now.*

What else had the article said about the fire? The house burnt to the ground and claimed the life of an old woman and her dog. They found the woman's remains, but there was no trace of her pet.

This must be the dog. It didn't die after all. The article also mentioned that the victim left behind two daughters. Matty gazed down at the creature staring back at her, and she remembered how she cherished everything her own mother, deceased now for six months, bequeathed to her. Matty could only imagine how joyful this unfortunate woman's two children would be to learn that their mother's beloved canine had lived.

“You stay right here, and I'll make some phone calls,” Matty informed the dog. She opened the front door. The dog, quicker than she, scrambled up and ran into the house. Pleased with its maneuver, it shook itself. Powdery

ash floated down upon the clean kitchen floor. Matty sniffed the air and opened the kitchen window, while the dog watched her, its tongue lolling out of its mouth.

The dog continued to gaze at her with intent eyes, as if trying to convey some message. Matty wondered if it might be hungry or thirsty. She poured water into a bowl, put lunchmeat on a plate, and set both down on the floor. The dog lapped up half the water, gulped all the ham, and whimpered for more. Matty put the rest of the sliced meat on the plate. The dog finished it in seconds and began sniffing the ground.

Oh dear. Matty hurried to the front door and opened it. “Do that outside, doggy.”

The dog glanced up at the sound of her voice, but refused to exit the house. Matty had to do something. She ran to the backdoor and threw it open. The dog liked that option better and ran outside. Matty witnessed the dog do its—her—business on the grass. Once finished, she pranced into the house and planted herself in front of Matty. The dog’s little stump of a tail twirled like the rotor on a tiny helicopter, scattering ash all over Matty’s carpet.

Remembering the letters on the collar, Matty asked her unwanted guest, “Is your name Pesky, because it fits you to a tee.”

The smoky creature cocked her head and regarded her reluctant host as if trying to understand. Matty suddenly remembered she had left the groceries in the car,

and she went to fetch them. The little dog trailed behind her, almost tripping her. Instead of running away, which Matty hoped she might do, the pooch stuck close. She followed Matty back into the kitchen and watched her put her purchases into the pantry and the refrigerator. After Matty finished, she went to her linen closet, the little dog following, and took out an old beach towel. She twisted it into a nest and placed it on the floor next to her desk. The dog obliging lay on it.

“You’re a smart one,” Matty said.

The dog gave her tail a couple of wags in response to the compliment.

Matty sat in front of her computer and brought up the article about the fire she’d read earlier. The origin was under investigation. It also said that the name of the deceased homeowner was Agnes Whitshaw, she lived on Elm Street, and it mentioned one of the daughters by name. Zelma Critzen was quoted as saying her mom sometimes forgot to turn off the stove. *How sad*. Matty’s own mother, may she rest in peace, had on occasion left the oven on by mistake. Time to contact Zelma. Matty did a search for the unusual name on the computer. Only one listing came up in Couper.

“You’ll be with your family, soon,” she told the dog, dialing the phone number.

“Hello?” a woman answered in a husky, cigarette voice.

“Mrs. Critzen?”

“Who’s this?” the woman asked her tone sharpening.

“My name is—”

“If my landlord told you to call, tell her I’m not moving until after the judge hears my side of things.”

“I’m not calling about that,” Matty assured her.

“If you’re one of those damn collection agencies, I got no money, so quit bothering me.”

“Mrs. Critzen, this call is concerning your deceased mother.”

“I’m not responsible for her debts. You have some nerve calling, with her just dead.”

“Please listen. This is about your mother’s dog. She didn’t die in the fire. I found her.”

“You found a dog?” Zelma’s voice went an octave higher. “Of all the nerve—I hope you don’t expect to palm some mutt off on me.”

Not the reaction Matty expected. “I truly believe the dog belonged to your mother.”

“Look, lady, I don’t want a damn dog. As far as I’m concerned, it died along with her.”

Unbelievable. Matty could feel her ire rising. “Your mom wouldn’t want you to turn your back on her pet. She must have loved it.”

“That she did. I couldn’t believe how much she doted on it. She never treated me and my sister half as good. The last time I talked to dear old mom, she told me

she'd see me in hell. Well, I guess she made it there first.”

How could anyone talk that way about her deceased mother? Matty should hang up on the heartless woman. She glanced down at the dog. The pooch was shaking her head, and more soot floated onto the carpet. Matty continued, in what she hoped was a reasonable tone, “Though it’s a shame you and your mother didn’t get along—”

“Get along? That evil, old witch threw me out as soon as she legally could, and she didn’t care where I landed. Do you have any idea what that’s like?”

Matty’s own mother had sent both her and her brother to college at eighteen, after saving for years to pay for most of it. “No, I guess I don’t. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry, how do you think I feel?” The woman took a breath. “It doesn’t matter anymore. The funeral home is cremating what’s left of her this afternoon. She paid up front for all of that. Good thing, since I’d have left her body to rot in the county morgue.”

Matty thought of her own mother’s ashes. She had gathered her mother’s friends together, and they had gone out on a boat and sprinkled the remains into the ocean, just as her mom had requested.

“Drop the dog at the shelter or leave it on a highway,” Zelma said. “I don’t care.”

Beyond shocked, yet not giving up, Matty tried one more avenue. “Maybe your sister—”

Zelma snorted. “Norma wants that dog as much as I

do.”

There was no dealing with this woman. “I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“One second.”

Matty hesitated a moment before responding, “Yes?”

“Did you find anything else besides the dog?” Zelma asked, then added in an accusatory tone, “What were you doing on her property, anyway?”

“I don’t even know where she lives. The dog showed up on my doorstep.”

“Oh.” Zelma sounded disappointed. Then she began to chuckle in a way that made Matty’s skin crawl. “On second thought, you should call Norma. My sister would love to get her hands on that mutt.”

That sounded ominous. Perhaps Matty should contact Norma only as a last resort. Though she wanted to end the call and never speak with Zelma again, Matty had one last question for this daughter. “Do you know the dog’s name? Hello?”

But Zelma was gone. Matty placed the phone back on its cradle and gazed down at the “mutt.” The nameless pooch, oblivious to her homeless state, had fallen asleep, her chin resting on Matty’s foot.

Two

“That went well, didn’t it—Peppy?” Her uninvited guest scratched her left ear and reached over to lick Matty’s leg. “You didn’t want to live with that mean lady, anyway, did you, ah, Poochy?” The dog still did not react. “Not your name, huh? I’ll keep trying, but I need to call you something until I figure it out. Do you mind being Poochy for the time being?”

Poochy wagged her tail for a moment, not moving her head from Matty’s foot. Matty shook her head. *Now I’m talking to a dog and waiting for her to answer me. I have been alone too long.* She sat at her computer, wondering what to do next. Since the family didn’t want Poochy, the easiest solution might be to drop her off at a shelter. Poochy seemed very loving and sweet. Surely, some animal lover would give her a home.

Matty accessed a search engine on the laptop, typed a word, and clicked her mouse a few times. The results displayed the Couper Animal Shelter’s telephone number. She dialed it, and a recorded voice told her what key combination would lead to a live human being. Matty pressed the appropriate buttons, and the machine on the other end put her on hold. While she waited for someone to pick up, she scratched the dog’s chin with her foot. Poochy bent her head to one side, so that Matty’s toe could get to a certain spot. She must have reached it, because the dog’s eyes closed in apparent bliss.

“This is the Couper Animal Shelter. I’m Edgar. How may I direct you?” a man asked in a singsong voice. He didn’t pause his spiel long enough for her to reply. “Are you interested in volunteering, donating, adopting a pet—”

“None of the above,” Matty replied. “I found a dog —”

“—our spaying or vaccination clinic hours—”

“No, I want to—”

“—pet training services, or perhaps you’re interested in fostering an animal?”

Edgar paused for a breath, and Matty jumped into the one-way conversation. “Just listen for a second. A dog showed up on my doorstep. The owner died in a fire, and I need to drop the pooch off at the shelter.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. You need to contact the family, not us.”

“I tried that already. They don’t want the dog. What’s a good time for us to stop by?”

“I see. You wish to surrender an animal.” Edgar sniffed. “Is it a puppy?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What breed is it?”

Matty’s knowledge of dogs was limited, but she made a guess. “Terrier.”

“I see. We’ll need to know what kind of terrier she is—and the AKC papers for proof—her age, vaccination history, and, of course, we need proof of neutering.”

“I found her on my doorstep. I don’t have any of that stuff. She looks like a terrier, or part terrier to me.” Matty frowned down at Poochy, a new worry popping into her head. “How can you tell whether she’s been fixed or not?”

“Would you like an appointment with our clinic?”

“Isn’t there an easier way to tell?”

“You can wait until she has puppies.”

“What?” Matty imagined her house with a dozen little Poochys running around. “I’m not keeping her long enough for that to happen. I’m new in town, can you give me directions to—”

“I’m sorry, but I’m afraid we aren’t taking in any more mixed-breed animals at this time. I can put you on a waiting list. Right now, the wait is nine months.”

Nine months? That was long enough for Poochy to infest her house with a couple of litters. “Why so long?”

“We’re full to capacity. Purebreds and puppies are easier to place, so we make an exception for them.”

“Since you can’t help me, do you have any suggestions on how to find the dog a home?”

“You might put an ad in the *Couper Courier*. However, you must be careful to screen the folks who respond to make sure they don’t want the dog for nefarious purposes.”

Edgar was starting to get on Matty’s nerves. “What kind of nefarious purpose would someone have for a small dog?”

“Some people adopt a dog, then they sell it to a medical laboratory for experimentation.”

Matty imagined Poochy hooked up to an IV and with electrodes connected to her head. “That’s horrible.”

“Yes, it is. Are you aware that certain cultures consider dogs a food item?”

Matty glanced down in horror at the sleeping terrier. *Poochy burgers?* “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I wish I were. It’s a harsh world, ma’am. Sometimes,” his voice went lower, “even worse happens to stray animals.”

Why was he telling her this? Matty imagined Poochy strapped to a rack, yelping in pain. *Ridiculous.* “An ad would take too long, anyway. Can’t you make an exception and take her? I’m desperate here.”

“I wish I could.” After a pause, Edgar said, “You might try the pound.”

“The dog pound,” Matty repeated, hope rising.

“Less than ten percent of their animals are adopted. They put down the other ninety percent.”

Poochy snuggled even closer to Matty’s foot, and she began to snore. Could Matty send her to an almost certain death? “I don’t like those odds.”

“Sometimes even *we* must resort to euthanasia.”

Poochy’s future appeared bleak, but how did that become Matty’s problem? *How much time and attention do I owe a stray?* Maybe if Matty turned the dog out,

someone more inclined to help would come across her.

As if he'd read Matty's mind, Edgar added, "You don't want to abandon the dog. Stray animals go through prolonged suffering before succumbing to starvation or disease."

Matty pictured a bone-thin Poochy lying alone in a field somewhere. *Ah, geez.* "I won't let that happen."

"You have a kind heart, ma'am. Why don't you adopt her? They make wonderful companions."

Now Matty knew what Edgar's motive was in telling her all this. She should have known he was trying to manipulate her. "I don't want a dog."

"I'm sorry to hear that. With the economy, more and more people surrender their pets to us. We don't have the funds or space for all of them. Poor creature. Pity you don't want her." Edgar sighed audibly. "Let me give you the number to the dog pound. Her suffering won't last long there."

Matty rolled her eyes. "I'll look it up if I need it."

"I wish you and the dog the best of luck."

Matty ended the call. Poochy woke up with a start as if wondering where she was. She gazed up at Matty with her dark eyes. Maybe she knew her fate lay in Matty's reluctant hands. "Don't worry, Poochy, I promise I won't let anything *nefarious* happen to you."

Still, even if Edgar's warnings were melodramatic, the dog's options were few, unless Matty could come up

with a way to find her a new owner. She resigned herself to keeping the dog for at least one night, which meant it was time to bathe Poochy and buy her food.

Matty tapped her fingers on the desk trying to think of other alternatives for the dog. Even if Agnes Whitshaw didn't get along with her children, she must have had friends. Matty's mother's neighbors adored her and helped to the very end. The same would probably be true for Agnes. The newspaper article said she lived on Elm Street, which wasn't far away. Even in Couper, there shouldn't be more than one recently burnt down house on any given street at any given time.

“Come on, Poochy, let's go find you a home.”

Three

Matty picked Poochy up, and the terrier licked her chin. *Amazing how quickly one becomes inured to dog spit.* She took the towel and wrapped it around the animal, and then tucked the terrier under her arm and exited the house. She placed the dog in the backseat of the station wagon, and she was glad that the leather interior option was still within in her means when she bought it. Poochy wagged her tail, apparently content to go anywhere with Matty. Once Matty reached Elm, she turned right and, after a few minutes, she spotted a blackened shell of a house, surrounded by yellow police tape.

Poochy stood with her paws on the backseat window, whimpering. She stared at Matty then scratched at the car door. *Does she recognize where she is?* Matty opened her own door and barely caught the dog before she jumped out. Poochy squirmed in Matty's arms, frantic. After a minute, Matty couldn't hold the creature any longer. The dog scampered over to the front of the blackened lot and began sniffing around. Poochy seemed afraid to approach the house. Instead, she sat down and stared at the remains, whining deep in her throat.

Poor dog. Matty knew the heartbreak of losing a loved one and her home. She picked the terrier up, murmuring something she hoped was soothing, and put her back in the car. Poochy, no longer struggling, curled up on the back seat, hiding her head the best she could under her

stub of a tail.

“Sorry, girl.” Poochy lifted her head, and Matty patted the dog a few times hoping that would comfort her. After a minute, she closed the car door and surveyed the rundown neighborhood. The worn houses needed paint, and the front lawns grew more weeds than grass.

The front door of the pink house next to Agnes Whitshaw’s former home opened, and a woman came out wrapped in a long sweater and wearing fuzzy slippers. She shuffled over to Matty, her lined face showing concern.

“If you’re looking for Agnes Whitshaw, her house burnt down last night and the good Lord took her.”

From within the car, Poochy pawed at a window and began barking at the neighbor. “Oh, my goodness, is that her dog? I hardly recognize her. Everyone thinks she died in the fire along with Agnes.”

Matty extended her hand. “Hello, I’m Matty Cruz. I live nearby, and I found this pooch on my doorstep today. Agnes’ death must be a terrible shock to you and all of her neighbors.”

The older woman shook Matty’s hand. “I’m Ruth Goodfellow. Agnes moved in a couple of years back after her own mother died and left the house to her. I didn’t know Agnes well. She preferred to keep to herself. I’m sorry to say most everyone around here found her unwelcoming, even downright hostile sometimes.

Whenever anyone made too much noise, in Agnes' opinion, or children played in front of her house, she'd come out and start yelling at them." Ruth shook her head. "Not that *I* didn't try to befriend her. The Bible says to love your neighbor like yourself. Once, I even invited her to my church—offered to take her in my car with my own family. She refused to go, told me to leave her alone, and slammed the door on my face. I prayed that day to make me more understanding and tolerate of the unsociable." Ruth admitted, "I can't say it worked that well as far as Agnes was concerned."

"Sounds like Agnes Whitshaw was difficult at best," Matty commented, remembering her conversation with Zelma. No one could be gracious all the time, not even Matty's own deceased mother. However, being uncivil to everyone appeared to have been the dead woman's modus operandi.

"She didn't accept God in her life—not a smart idea, not when you're getting up there in years. To me, the only creature she cared for was that dog. Agnes walked it up and down the street every afternoon. My, my, my," Ruth said, shaking her head. "Imagine it surviving and poor Agnes not." The neighbor's forehead wrinkled. "How did you know the dog belonged to her?"

"I read an article about the fire and between that and the dog's appearance, I figured it out. Do you know the pooch's name?"

“No, I’m sorry, I don’t.”

“Was no one close to Agnes? I’m hoping somebody will give the dog a home.”

Ruth shook her head again. “Not that I know of. She had food delivered, you know, that Meals-on-Wheels thing. Time to time, a younger man picked her up in an old sports car. I don’t know his name, though. The week she died, she took a taxicab somewhere. Other than that, she mostly stayed home and avoided everyone.”

“According to the newspaper article I read, Mrs. Whitshaw had two daughters. Did either of them visit her often?” Matty asked, hoping the younger daughter kept in touch with her mother.

“Can’t say that they did. A couple of times, a hard-looking woman about your age walked over to visit Agnes. She didn’t live in the neighborhood. Easy enough to get here; a bus stop is just a few blocks away. Always smoking a cigarette and dropping the butts where she pleased. Why in heaven’s name do people act like that?” Agnes looked skyward, as if expecting an answer to her question. When none came, she continued, “Those visits turned ugly. After a short time, the whole neighborhood would hear them screaming at each other. After a bit, Mrs. Whitshaw would throw open her door and stand outside with her arms crossed, looking like Jesus before he cast out a demon, and the daughter would stalk out, cussing up a storm, not caring who heard.”

“That sounds dreadful,” Matty said.

“I’m not one to criticize the deceased, but Agnes should have dragged that girl to church every so often. It might have helped. A few days before the house burnt down, the cigarette smoker came, and I heard Agnes tell her not ever to come back.”

The cigarette smoker must have been Zelma.

“Neither daughter came after the fire?”

“Not immediately. After the fire department extinguished the blaze, everyone in the neighborhood stood outside or peeked through their windows at the police and firemen. Of course, the television and newspaper folks came as well and tried to interview people. No one likes to speak ill of the dead, so no one had much to say.”

“So when did Agnes’ family show?”

“The cigarette-smoker came a little later, and a reporter did talk to her. She put on quite the performance with all her boohooing. Once the reporter left, her crying stopped. This morning, she came back with another gal a few years younger and real skinny.” Ruth wrinkled her nose. “My grandson called her a skank. Not charitable to call a woman that, still lying would be the greater sin. The two of them came strolling up the street around ten in the morning, and they started picking through the lot. Obvious, they only came to scavenge what they could. God knows, what they expected to find. The fire pretty much destroyed

everything.”

Ruth paused for a moment, and Matty jumped in. “That’s a shame. Did the man who sometimes picked her up come by?”

“Not that I saw.” Ruth pulled her old sweater around her and turned toward the remains of the house. “What a mess. I came out to talk to you because I hoped the city sent you to survey the place for cleanup. I doubt Agnes had fire insurance.”

Matty stood for a moment wondering what to do next. Poochy began to cry in the car. *I need to get her away from here.*

“One other thing, though,” the woman said.

Matty regarded Ruth, hope rising.

“One of the other neighbors overheard the fire marshal say they didn’t find any batteries in the smoke detectors.”

“Maybe Agnes, being old and all, couldn’t reach high enough to put any in them,” Matty reasoned.

“Or someone took them out.”

“Why would anyone do that?” Matty asked, surprised.

“I’m not sure, but like I said, not many people cared for Agnes. The firemen spent a lot of time examining what was left of the front and back doors. I saw them carry away some pieces of melted metal. They looked like padlocks to me.” Ruth lowered her voice. “Could be

someone locked Mrs. Whitshaw in.”

Matty was shocked. “Who could be that fiendish?”

“I know Agnes wasn’t the most lovable human being on the planet, still, that kind of behavior is uncalled for. Only the Lord in Heaven has the right to mete out punishment for our sins.” Ruth turned back to the charred house. “I better call the city and ask what they plan to do. Someone needs to—”

Tuning Ruth out, Matty considered the neighbor’s theories. *She must read too many crime novels.* Remembering her conversation with Edgar from the animal shelter, Matty began to wonder whether the Couperites as a whole might be prone to morbid exaggeration. Matty couldn’t imagine who would lock an old woman into a burning house. *Those things don’t happen in real life.* Besides, figuring out who or what caused the fire wasn’t the reason Matty came here. “You wouldn’t want a dog, would you?”

The neighbor laughed. “My two grandsons’ pit bulls wouldn’t take too kindly to her, I’m afraid.”

Matty gave an involuntary start. She read an article about stray pit bulls attacking people in Couper. She peered around, making sure none were lurking near her car. She mustered a smile for Ruth. “If any of Agnes’ friends or family come over, please phone me. This dog needs a home.” Matty wrote her number on a piece of paper from a notebook she kept in her purse. She tore out

the page and handed it to Ruth.

The neighbor took it from her. “Don’t hold your breath. No one cared what happened to Agnes Whitshaw, God bless her.” A serious look crossed her face. “I hope my children don’t treat me that way after I grow old and frail. You bet I made sure to raise every single one of them with a fear of God in their belly. They know they’ll burn in Hell if they don’t honor me until the day the Lord finally comes and takes me.”

Matty tried to think of an appropriate response to that. “I’m sure they’ll treat you with all the respect you deserve—and you’ll all meet up in Heaven, ah, not too soon, I hope. I’d better be going.”

Matty hurried toward her car. When she got to the door, she looked back at the neighbor and caught a glimpse of Ruth’s grim face, no doubt contemplating the possible fate of her children in the Hereafter.

Once she was in the car, Matty glanced back at Poochy. “Coming here was a waste of time.”

Poochy barely moved her tail in response. Matty felt sorry for the terrier and wished she hadn’t brought her. “Let’s get of here. You ready for your bath—Popsy?”

Poochy didn’t even lift her head and instead curled back into a ball, covering her muzzle with her dirty paws. Matty coughed. Her car smelled like the bottom of a barbecue pit. What should she use to bathe the dog? Somewhere she had read that using human shampoo

wasn't a good idea—something about the PH balance being wrong.

Matty had spotted a pet store not too far from the Save-a-Lot. They should have dog food and shampoo.

“Next stop—the Pet Palace,” Matty announced and put the car in gear.

Four

Once she parked in front of the Pet Palace, Matty wondered whether to leave the dog alone in the car. Poochy appeared content to stay curled up in the back seat. The day was brisk; nonetheless, Matty rolled down the car windows a quarter turn to give the terrier and the car some air. She walked into the storefront thinking this shouldn't take too long.

The store was big, close to the size of the Save-a-Lot. Once past the line of registers, Matty blinked at the rows and rows of animal products. Signs from the ceiling divided the building into birds and hamsters, fish and reptiles, cats and dogs. She wandered over to the dog area. Aisles of stuff confronted her. The signs listed the countless items—clothes, beds, leashes, collars, vitamins, toys—lots and lots of toys—and the entire back section was devoted to an infinite variety of canned and dry foods. Overwhelmed, Matty suppressed a desire to run.

“May I help you?” Matty turned to find a young woman dressed in black slacks and a polo shirt with the store name embroidered on the front pocket.

“Maybe,” Matty said. “Do dogs really need all of these things?”

The woman smiled. Her nametag read Amelia. “Are you a new dog owner?”

“No. I'm just sheltering a stray that showed up at my door. I'm trying to find a home for her.” Matty looked at

the girl hopefully. "Would you know anyone? I think she'll be a cutie pie once I give her a bath."

"I'm afraid not," Amelia said. "It's getting harder and harder for dogs with the economy and all. Did you call the Couper Animal Shelter?"

"First thing. Unfortunately, they're full. They suggested I try finding a home for her."

"Why don't you adopt her?"

Maybe she'd Edgar's sister. Matty said, "I've never owned a pet, and I don't want to start now. The shelter suggested the pound might be my last option for her, but it seems so cruel..."

"Not the pound," Amelia said, shaking her head with vigor, her eyes round. "They give them seventy-two hours, and after that they gas 'em."

Matty pictured Poochy strapped to a chair while someone dropped gas pellets all around her. "What a horrible way to go."

"Absolutely. You've tried finding the owner?"

Matty recounted Poochy's history and her attempts to find the dog a home.

"And you don't even know her name?" the girl asked.

"No. I've nicknamed her Poochy for the time being."

"Luckily Poochy ended up at *your* door."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Since you know the owner's name, you should try

calling the veterinarians near her old home. Once they know the dog's story, whatever clinic treated Poochy will give you her information. You might even find an emergency contact that might be willing to adopt the dog."

"I'll try that." Matty surveyed the store and asked, "I need help buying a few things. What should I bathe her with—and she needs food."

"Let me get you a shopping cart. I'll be back." Amelia walked to the front of the store, leaving Matty alone.

Why would I need one of those? "She's only going to be with me a few days," Matty said to the girl's retreating back.

An hour later, Matty reached the checkout line with a cart full of items even though she'd refused to buy half the things Amelia recommended. At the register, Matty grimaced at the total on the receipt. The dog's name should be "Pricey."

Poochy had been watching for Matty, and she began barking at the first sight of her. Once in the car, the terrier jumped into her lap and tried to drown Matty in kisses. Matty looked down at her soot-covered clothes. *I'll need a bath after I give you yours.*

After arriving home, Matty removed the old collar from Poochy and threw it into the trash. After reading the label on the back of the shampoo bottle, she quarter filled the bathtub with warm water and placed Poochy in it. The

dog seemed as eager for the bath as Matty to give it. After much scrubbing and toweling, Matty used her blow dryer and the new dog brush to finish the job.

She smiled at her handiwork. The dog's short, tan coat appeared downright fluffy after Matty's grooming. Matty strapped on the new pink collar Amelia had persuaded her to buy. The girl had said someone was more likely to adopt Poochy if she came with all the essentials. The terrier, her ears erect and stub of a tail held high, pranced around the living room. Though Matty made no claim to being a canine connoisseur, she thought the dog had turned out adorable. Surely, someone would fall in love with her.

Matty sacrificed an old pillow to give Poochy a makeshift bed to sleep on. The dog sniffed at it before lying down. "Don't get too used to this," Matty told her.

Poochy closed her dark eyes and licked Matty's hand. Matty fondled the terrier's silky ears.

The dog, despite her ordeal, showed no signs of being the worse for wear, so Matty decided that it was best to wait until she found the terrier's regular doctor before having Poochy checked out. With a little research, Matty was sure she would discover the clinic Agnes Whitshaw had patronized. Matty looked forward to finding out the dog's medical history, her real name, and the name of someone Agnes had trusted to take care of her beloved pet.

Poochy left her new bed and went to pick up one of the squeak toys Matty had bought for her. She dropped it at Matty's feet and sat down.

Even Matty knew what they meant. "Okay. I'll make those calls tomorrow. After everything you've been through, you deserve a little play time."

Poochy gave a little bark and tail wag as if glad that Matty had gotten the point.

Five

The next day, Matty did a search on the Internet for veterinarians near Elm Street. She made a list and began calling each one. After two hours on the phone, Matty gave up and admitted defeat. Nobody had a record of Mrs. Whitshaw, nor knew of anyone who wanted to adopt a dog.

“Looks like you and I are both victims of this economy—Pipsy?” Poochy didn’t stir from the pillow bed.

What other options did Matty have? Mrs. Whitshaw had two daughters. Despite Ruth Goodfellow’s description, perhaps the youngest one possessed a more tender heart than the elder one did, though, based on the phone call with Zelma, Matty doubted it. Still, there was always a chance Zelma had portrayed her sister inaccurately. Matty wouldn’t have done her due diligence if she didn’t at least contact—what was the younger daughter’s name, again?—Norma. Using the Internet, Matty checked the death notices in the *Couper Courier* and found a short two-liner for Mrs. Whitshaw, which listed her age as seventy-two—the same age as Matty’s mother when she passed away a few months earlier—and the surviving family members: Zelma Critzen and Norma Whitshaw.

Using her computer once again, Matty located a Couper telephone number for Norma. After a couple of

rings, someone picked up.

“Hello. Am I speaking to Norma Whitshaw?”

“Could be,” a woman drawled. “Depends who’s asking.”

“My name is Matty Cruz. I read of your mother’s death. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Don’t be sorry. Her time was up and she had to go,” the woman said. “What do you want?”

Norma’s slowness of speech and lack of emotion was even more disconcerting than Zelma’s hostility. Still, Matty was never one to give up easily. She decided to try a subtler approach with the younger sister. “I believe I found something that belonged to your mother—something dear to her.”

Norma’s tone sharpened. “What did you find?”

“I found a—”

“Was it a key? Hot damn, I thought it burnt up in the fire.” Norma had come to life. “Who did you say you were, again? Where was it?”

Perhaps Matty’s indirect approach was a mistake. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t planning to return a key to you.”

“You’re not returning it?” Norma Whitshaw sounded incredulous. “Do you know who my family is? You cross us at your peril.”

Matty said in haste, “I think I’ve given you the wrong impression. I guess you haven’t spoken to your sister, recently.”

A stream of profanity followed. “If you gave it to Zelma, you better get it back, if you know what’s good for you. My sister is a stupid—”

Matty hadn’t heard a woman reference another using that particular term, ever. This call was going far worse than the one with Zelda had. Matty tried to dig herself out. “Miss Whitshaw, what I meant is that I didn’t find a key. I found your mother’s dog.”

“You found her dog? Why would I want that stupid piece of—”

Matty’s own temper began to rise. “I don’t appreciate you using that kind of language. I don’t see why you and your sister hate Pooch—the dog so much. She’s very sweet, and she’s the only thing left of your mother’s.”

Norma’s voice went from hot to icy. “I don’t need any reminders of that old hag. I can still hear her telling me how stupid and useless I was. She even refused to see me for the last two years of her life. Screw her and screw that dog.”

Enough already about how bad a mother Agnes was. All mothers made mistakes. A daughter could choose to remember the good or wallow in the bad. “Maybe Agnes wouldn’t have won mother of the year, but no one deserves to burn to death like she did. Isn’t it time to forgive her for whatever mistakes she made raising you?”

“Nosy—” the word again. “If you had known my mom, you wouldn’t waste your breath defending her. Go

ahead and bring Mom's precious little pet to me. I have a cousin who runs a dog fighting ring, and he'll put that mutt to good use."

Matty slammed the phone down, breathing hard. Poochy must have noticed how upset she was because the terrier walked over and rested her head on Matty's knee. Matty impulsively picked the terrier up and hugged her. Maybe Edgar hadn't exaggerated about the nefarious things that could happen to a stray in Couper.

Poor Agnes. How could her children hate her so much? Matty's own mother had been a tough character, ruling their home with an iron will. That hadn't severed the bond between mother and daughter. When Mom became terminally ill, Matty had taken family leave to care for her instead of putting her in a nursing home, even after Matty's boss warned her that it was a risky time to be away from work. Yes, it might have cost Matty her career, but she never regretted doing the right thing.

Matty had to accept that Zelma and Norma were a dead end as far as Poochy was concerned. They detested their mother and that hate spilled over onto her dog. Matty would never willingly give the terrier to either of them. The only thing they wanted that had belonged to Agnes was some kind of a key. How could a key end up on Matty's doormat?

Matty put Poochy back on the ground. "You're better off without those horrible women—Patsy?"

The little creature yawned as if bored, gave a bark, and waited expectantly.

“Maybe Patsy is a better name for me,” Matty said, going to the kitchen to fetch the dog a treat.

Matty had exhausted all options but one. Edgar suggested Matty post an ad in the local paper. That might be worth a try. She would write it cute—*orphaned dog escapes fire*. Who could resist that? Running it in the *Couper Courier* shouldn't cost much. Of course, she'd follow Edgar's advice and be careful to vet whoever wanted to adopt Poochy.

Matty began to think over her conversation with Ruth Goodfellow, Agnes' neighbor. After talking to Zelma and Norma, Matty wondered if she'd dismissed the woman's lurid speculations too hastily. She decided to check if there was a follow-up to the first news article on the fire. Sure enough, the *Courier* had posted another story. The latest one quoted the fire inspector as saying that the blaze's origin appeared suspicious. The reporter also quoted unnamed sources who claimed that there was no apparent motive for arson. Mrs. Whitshaw had kept to herself, no savings, no life insurance, and she'd allowed her fire coverage to lapse. The old lady's only source of income, social security, ceased with her death. However, the police were looking into the incident—specifically one Detective Phil Bester of the Couper Police Department. He asked that people contact him if they had

any information to share about the death of Agnes Whitshaw. Matty wrote his name on her notepad, and she wondered if she should call him. *Maybe not*. He wouldn't be interested in Poochy, and no matter how much her daughters hated Agnes, Matty doubted anyone would kill their own mother even if they benefited from the act.

“Your owner left nothing except you, Poochy, but the only thing those Whitshaw girls are interested in is some stupid key that melted in that fire,” Matty said. She was falling into the habit of talking to Poochy, as if the terrier could understand her. Matty laughed at herself. “Like you'd know anything about that. You're only interested in getting another one of those cookies I bought you from the Pet Palace.”

Poochy cocked her head, one errant ear falling over a dark eye, and gave what Matty could swear was a doggy grin.

Six

“You’re actually keeping that stray in your house?” Matty could hear her younger brother’s surprise, even over the speakerphone. “You’re lucky Mom isn’t around anymore. She would have been horrified.”

Their mother had refused to allow them to keep a pet when they were growing up saying animals were too much trouble. “You’re probably right.”

This was the first time Ricardo had bothered to call her since Matty moved to Couper, and she was happy to hear from him. These days, the siblings mostly kept in touch on birthdays and holidays. She’d last seen Ricardo at her mother’s funeral, which he attended alone. Mom and Ricardo’s wife, Katie, had not gotten along.

“What else could I do? Her previous owner’s family is a nightmare. They wouldn’t even talk to me long enough to tell me the dog’s name, much less, who her veterinarian was.”

“Why do you care who her vet might have been?”

“I was hoping to find out more about the dog and to see who Agnes Whitshaw had listed as an emergency contact. That person might want to take Poochy. I called all the vets near Agnes’ house, but I struck out.”

“Poochy,” Ricardo repeated Matty’s temporary moniker for the terrier. “Why don’t you come up with a better name for her and keep her yourself?”

Now, even her brother was hopping onto the

adoption bandwagon. “No way. Besides, dogs are expensive. The last thing I need is another mouth to feed.”

“She can’t eat that much,” Ricardo said. “You need someone or something in your life up there in Timbuktu. It doesn’t sound like the folks in that town are that friendly, and I bet you aren’t either.”

Thanks for the pep talk, brother dearest. Because Ricardo rarely called her, Matty kept her sarcasm to herself. “I’d make a lousy dog owner. Anyway, I’m still hoping someone will answer my ad.”

“It’s been a week and not even one phone call?”

“No.”

“If you think about it, you and the dog are in the same boat. I mean you’ve both lost your entire lives, practically overnight. She lost her home and owner in a fire, and you lost Mom, your career, your income—”

“We’ll be fine,” Matty said, cutting him off before he could say more. The last thing she needed was for her brother to rehash the last dismal year of her life.

Ricardo took the hint and changed the subject.

“When are you going to start looking for another job? I mean, how are you making it up there?”

“I have enough to cover my expenses, if I’m careful. I’ve sent out a few resumes, checked job sites. Looks like no one in Couper wants a mature worker any more than my old company did. Would you believe the unemployment rate here rose to nine percent this year?”

“You should have researched Couper’s economic situation before you moved there,” Ricardo pointed out. “Anyway, you’re only fifty years old. You can’t sit around and do nothing. At least you had enough years in to qualify for retirement benefits before your company decided to lay you off. Though trying to make ends meet on your pension check must be the pits. I know the job market is tough, but you need to keep trying. It’s more than the money, your whole life revolved around your job. What do you do with yourself all day—watch television? Katie told me she read an article that people in your situation often fall into depression.”

Just like a younger brother to be brutally honest—only Matty didn’t want to hear it. Ricardo and his wife Katie had good jobs and lived the old life, her old life, back in California, and she didn’t need their advice on a situation they’d never experienced.

She glanced over at Poochy waiting at the backdoor. “I need to take the dog out. Say hi to Katie for me. Oh, and don’t forget to send pictures of the kids. They’re growing up fast.” Matty hesitated for a moment, before adding, “Maybe some time you and the family can come for a visit. They say it’s really beautiful here in the summer.”

“I guess I could mention it to Katie.” There was a moment of silence. “You know—we’re pretty busy here, with the family and all. I’m not sure when we’d find the time. I hope you understand.”

“I understand.” She was disappointed by his answer, but not surprised. “Poochy needs to tinkle. It was nice hearing from you.”

Matty pressed the button on the phone and ended the call. Ricardo and their mother had butted heads during his teenage years, and after he left for college, he kept his distance from her, and consequently from Matty. After Mom died, Ricardo had seen no reason to change things.

Matty went to the backdoor and opened it. Poochy, knowing the routine, went immediately outside. Agnes Whitshaw might have done a terrible job raising her two daughters, but she must have been an excellent dog owner. The terrier, a sweet and loving creature by nature, knew her basic commands and came to Matty perfectly housebroken. If she hadn't, Matty would have been in way over her head.

While watching Poochy sniffing the ground outside, Matty reflected how quickly the terrier had settled into her new, if temporary, home. The first night, Matty made the dog comfortable on the old pillow in the living room. However, the next morning Matty found a furry body pressed next to hers in bed. The following night, Matty closed her bedroom door and listened to the dog whine and howl for thirty minutes before she surrendered and invited Poochy in. Poochy had slept in the bed with her ever since. Matty began to view the term “dog ownership” in a whole new light.

Matty had to admit she found the dog's presence comforting. When she woke up in the wee hours of the morning realizing she'd only dreamed of being back in her former life, it was Poochy, snuggled next to her, that helped Matty fall asleep again. Maybe that was the reason she was finding it much easier to avoid napping on the couch the next day.

As Matty watched Poochy trot over to pick up her ball, she could see how people might let a dog insinuate itself into their lives. *And, hopefully, someone like that will read my ad and call.* She watched the dog whirl her tail in the air and lower her front legs. The dog care and training book Matty purchased, on her third visit to the Pet Palace, said this was a demonstration of play posture.

“You want to play fetch?” Matty asked.

Poochy barked. Even though it was a wet and cold day, Matty sat down on a patio chair, picked up the toy and threw it. Poochy leaped after the ball through the misty rain, brought it back to her, and waited for Matty to throw it again. She obliged.

While she tossed the ball, Matty deliberated on what her next step should be regarding the terrier. Ricardo was right to a certain extent. Poochy was a poor name, and the dog deserved a better one. The book had also stressed the importance of keeping up on vaccines—and Matty still didn't know whether Poochy could become a mother. Perhaps it was time to choose both a veterinarian and a

better name for the terrier. Still Matty loathed the idea of eliminating Poochy's last connection to her previous life and owner.

After a while, Matty grew tired of the game, even though Poochy could have gone on much longer. Matty left the patio to reenter the house, and the dog trailed behind her. She picked up a towel and dried Poochy off, but not before the pooch gave herself a thorough shake.

Poochy's presence might dirty up the house more, but that didn't bother Matty as much as it first had. What were a few spots on the carpet between friends? She patted the terrier. "I can tell Agnes took wonderful care of you. She would have made sure you had your shots and all the rest."

Matty would renew her search for Poochy's veterinarian, and postpone any radical moves. It might take longer than she first expected, but she was fine with that. Ricardo was right on another point. Poochy did make Matty feel less alone. It was hard to feel sorry for herself with a lively dog in the home, demanding care and attention. Not that Poochy didn't pay Matty back for her efforts. Whenever Matty began to fret over the past or worry about the future, the little terrier, seeming to sense it, would lie down next to Matty, ready to cuddle and commiserate.

She deserves to be with someone who loves her. If I can find her vet, I'll find that person. Logically, Agnes

must have chosen a pet clinic close to her home, yet Matty had called all the vets within five miles of that location without success. Matty reviewed her discussion with Ruth Goodfellow. The neighbor told her that Agnes lived on Elm for only a couple of years; however, from the obit, Agnes resided her entire life in Couper. Perhaps, she continued to use a vet close to her previous home.

Matty decided to widen her search of veterinary clinics to cover more ground. She made the parameter changes on her computer and several new names and phone numbers popped up. Matty groaned. That would be a lot of time on the phone. *Let's get this over with.* She began dialing. On the sixth call, Matty reached Barks Animal Hospital.

“Hello, my name is Matty Cruz,” she began, almost by rote. “I found a little dog that belonged to a Mrs. Agnes Whitshaw. I’m calling to find out whether she brought the dog to your clinic.”

“I can check for you. Do you want us to contact Mrs. Whitshaw and tell her that you found her dog?” the young woman asked, sounding very professional.

All the clinics asked her that same question, and Matty answered it as she always did. “Agnes Whitshaw died in a fire and—”

“Wait, I remember reading that a woman died in a house fire last week.”

“Yes, that was Mrs. Whitshaw. Somehow, the dog

escaped and she showed up on my porch. I'm kind of fostering her."

"Mrs. Whitshaw...Mrs. Whitshaw. The name sounds familiar." The girl paused for a moment. "Now, I remember her. An elderly woman who owned a little, brown, terrier mix. She's the woman who died in the fire? How sad. Was her dog injured?"

Finally. "No, the dog's fine."

"That's wonderful. I mean, too bad that Mrs. Whitshaw died. Still it's wonderful you took the dog in. I remember she was the sweetest little thing. The dog I mean, not Mrs. Whitshaw." The woman paused. "Gosh, I shouldn't have said that."

"No worries," Matty assured her. "From what people tell me, Agnes must have been a very difficult woman to deal with."

"That's how come I remember her. She left quite an impression. Still, I shouldn't speak ill of the dead. She took good care of her terrier, though she wasn't your typical dog owner."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think giving a dog love and affection came naturally to her."

Or to anyone, even her daughters. "Do you recall the dog's name?"

"Not offhand. Mrs. Whitshaw hadn't come in for a long while. The office switched computer systems a month

ago.” Another long pause. “No, she’s not in the database. That’s not surprising since we didn’t migrate the older records. We do keep those, but they’re packed away in the back. It will take some time to find Mrs. Whitshaw’s paperwork”

Wagging her stubby tail, Poochy sat up and came over to Matty. She patted the dog’s head. “I would really appreciate it if you could do that.”

“I’ll explain to the doctor your situation—wait a second—Mrs. Whitshaw may have bought a collar from us.”

“Okay.” Matty wasn’t sure why this mattered.

“We sell a lot of those to our clients. It comes with a plastic sleeve that threads onto the band of the collar. As a courtesy, we always make sure a slip of paper with all of the dog’s information is placed in it.”

“You know, I saw something plastic on her old collar. The smoke from the fire left it so grimy, I threw it out and bought another one. That collar should still be in the trash.

“If you can find it, everything a new owner needs will be on that paper.”

“I’m only keeping the dog temporarily,” Matty reminded her.

“Of course you are,” the girl said in a tone that irritated Matty.

Not another one. Matty continued, “Regardless, I’d

appreciate a copy of the paper records and, please, set up an appointment for Poochy. She seems healthy to me, but I don't know much about dogs and I want her checked out."

The girl agreed and scheduled a time for early next week. The next thing on Matty's agenda was to find the old collar. She took the trash to the curb that morning, but she hadn't heard the truck come by yet. The leather band lay somewhere in the bottom of one of the bags piled into the container. Matty would have to dig into the smelly garbage. "You're just barrels of fun, Poochy."

The terrier wagged her tail and brought the ball over to her. After dropping it, the pooch jumped up, her front paws resting on Matty's knees and her tongue hanging out in what Matty now knew *was* a dog smile.

Matty ruffled the terrier's ears. "You're lucky you're so cute. We'll play later." Matty stood up and walked outside to begin her unpleasant task.

With the trash truck rumbling only a few houses away, Matty finally found the collar. She pulled it out, nastier than ever, with garbage adding to the odor of the thing. She brought it inside the house, holding it between her thumb and index finger, and laid it on a paper towel on her clean kitchen counter. Poochy jumped up and down at the sight of the putrid piece of leather. Matty gingerly began feeling for a piece of paper inside the plastic sleeve. There was definitely something in there. She attempted to pry the plastic open with no success. The heat

from the fire welded it shut. She retrieved the scissors from her desk and sliced one end of the sleeve open, and something white poked out. Matty fetched a pair of tweezers and coaxed out a rolled piece of paper from the plastic.

She smoothed it out and read all of Poochy's vital information. She laughed. Agnes has been as challenged as Matty when it came to naming the dog. Matty bent over and tilted the dog's head upward. "Pretty? Pretty Girl?"

Pretty Girl jumped up, her tail twirling like mad and her eyes bright. She danced on her hind legs and covered Matty's hand with kisses.

"You are a Pretty Girl, aren't you?"

Matty went into the kitchen and gave the dog a biscuit. Pretty Girl ran to her old pillow and lay down to devour the treat. According to the paper, Pretty Girl, five years old and a crossbreed between terrier and who-knows-what, was spayed—thank God—and behind on some vaccinations, but not due for a rabies booster until next year. Matty turned the paper over looking for the emergency contact information.

"Darn," Matty said when she read the names.

Agnes must have been on better terms with her daughters at one time, because they were the only people listed.

Matty picked up the old collar, ready to discard it. She felt something hard still in the plastic sleeve. She

picked up the scissors and cut more of it away. After pulling at what was jammed inside, something shiny fell out and clanged to the floor.

Pretty Girl sniffed it. Then she sat down and gazed at Matty intently.

Seven

Matty knew immediately what kind of key it was from its brass color, the long blade, and the rounded bow. She'd opened her mother's safe-deposit box after her funeral with a similar one. She picked it up and balanced it on the palm of her hand. Why had Agnes hidden this in Pretty Girl's collar?

Only someone who took the dog in would have found it. That eliminated Zelma and Norma, which from what Matty had surmised was exactly what their mother wanted. Another thought came to mind. Perhaps Agnes couldn't escape her burning house, but she was able to save Pretty Girl somehow. *Maybe through a doggy door or a small window.* Whatever method Agnes employed, it must have taken a supreme effort for an old woman, her lungs full of smoke, to accomplish it. *Did she do it to save the dog or to save the key?* Either way, Agnes Whitshaw must have been one fierce, indomitable woman. One who would have given even Matty's own mother a run for her money.

The Whitshaw sisters had asked Matty whether she found anything else that belonged to their mother besides the dog. The younger one even mentioned a key. *Did they lock their mother in a burning house because she wouldn't give them what was in a safe-deposit box?* A week ago, Matty would have dismissed the idea as incredible. Normal people wouldn't do something that

heinous. But from what she had learned from Ruth Goodfellow and her brief conversations with the Whitshaw spawn, neither of the sisters were normal. *Or maybe they're normal for Couper.* That was a chilling thought. Either way, Matty knew what she had to do. She went to her desk and found the name of the policeman mentioned in the news story about the fire. She then called the Couper Police Department and asked to speak to Detective Phil Bester.

After her call was transferred, she heard the phone ring only once before Bester's recorded voice answered, and he assured her that her call was important to him. She left a detailed message and asked him to call her back as soon as possible.

Matty placed the key in the kitchen junk drawer in a box where she kept keys she no longer used. She would be glad once the detective took it off her hands. She was oddly pleased with herself that the mysteries surrounding Poochy—no, Pretty Girl—were resolved. Now she could concentrate on finding a good—no, a perfect home for the terrier.

Pretty Girl began to bark at the front door. Matty glanced at the oven clock: walk time. She had read that dogs did better with daily exercise, and she began taking Pretty Girl out every afternoon a few days ago. Though Matty had been a little apprehensive of the reaction her neighbors would have seeing her out and about, so far

nothing bad had happened. In fact, a few of them even nodded as she and the terrier walked by. Matty soon realized that she enjoyed the outings as much as Pretty Girl did. Her habit of lying on the couch all day in her pajamas was broken, and all because a small dog had come into her life.

Today they walked at a rapid pace. For the moment, patches of azure sky and soft, white clouds displaced the drizzling rain. Couper might be colder and wetter than California, yet on an everyday basis, Matty found her new home more beautiful. At one street corner, she paused to catch a glimpse of Mount Saint Helens, an enormous ice cream cone in the distance. Even though the volcano lost its majestic peak after it blew almost thirty years ago, it remained impressive.

Because her home in California sold so quickly, Matty had to make a decision where to relocate in a very short time frame. Instead of her usual thoroughness, she'd impulsively chosen Couper, WA in which to retire, all because she remembered how beautiful it was here. Part of that beauty were the mountain views. What she didn't realize the first time she saw them was that the majestic peaks were actually volcanoes. She'd subsequently discovered that the Pacific Northwest was part of the Pacific Ring of Fire, which made the whole region prone to massive earthquakes and tsunamis. To think, she had been sure she'd escaped any threat of those when she left

California.

Pretty Girl, all twenty pounds of her, pulled Matty from her standstill, and they continued on their path around the neighborhood. Matty mulled over what caused the rift between Agnes Whitshaw and her two daughters and what treasure the safe-deposit box held. Though Agnes alienated Zelma and Norma by treating them roughly as children, it must have been their desire for the contents of that box that made them murder her—if they did. Matty still had a hard time believing anybody would kill his or her mother for whatever reason.

Matty's mother had also been a tough character. Raising two children without a husband hadn't been easy for her. Yet, the family weathered the bad times and, at least, Matty kept a strong bond with the only parent she'd ever known. Matty would have gladly traded her small inheritance for a few more years with her mom. Could she say the same for her brother Ricardo? She wasn't sure. Mother and son had a strained relationship for years, which mostly stemmed from their mother's refusal to provide any information about their father.

"You don't need to know about him," she would say.

Matty accepted that. She figured her mother was protecting them from some terrible truth. Ricardo hadn't felt the same.

"He's my dad. You have to tell me what happened," he'd argue.

Mom would retaliate. “What happened is that he deserted us and left me alone to raise his children.” Then a screaming match would follow, and Matty would retreat to her room.

No, no mother was perfect, not even Matty’s mom. Still, she was positive that Ricardo would never have done anything to injure their mother in any way.

Since the news articles and death notice never mentioned a Mr. Whitshaw, perhaps Agnes also raised her daughters alone. Whatever hardships that circumstance had entailed might have twisted the Whitshaw’s familial bond into one of hatred. Matty would never know. Once she gave the key to Phil Bester, she would be out of it, and the Couper Police Department would unravel the mystery of why and who killed Agnes—and what they wanted from that safe-deposit box.

A half hour later, Matty and Pretty Girl returned to their home. Once inside, Matty let the dog off the leash and removed her own jacket. Thinking of a hot cup of tea, she placed a measuring cup filled with water in the microwave for heating. She noticed that the answering machine next to the oven was blinking. Perhaps Detective Bester called back. Matty played the message and the hair on the back of her neck rose.

“Hello, Zelma Critzen calling. You phoned me a week ago concerning my mom’s dog. Barks Animal Hospital called and told me you kept her. I may have given

you the wrong impression that day. I'll take the dog off your hands. Make sure you give me the dog's collar. It has, uh, sentimental value. You have my number."

After finding Pretty Girl's paper records, Barks must have called Agnes' emergency contacts to inform them who had the dog. Obviously, the receptionist mentioned the plastic sleeve on Pretty Girl's old collar, and sharp Zelma must have figured out where her mother hid the key. *It will be a cold day in hell before I turn Pretty Girl or that key over to that woman.*

The light continued to blink, which meant another message awaited her on the machine. Matty prayed it was from Phil Bester—no such luck. The other Whitshaw daughter left the second message.

"Norma Whitshaw here. I need my mom's dog and anything else that came with her. It's three in the afternoon, and I'll be at your house in half an hour. Don't get any ideas about keeping her stuff. If you do, I'll call the cops. Trust me, you don't want to be locked up in the Couper jail. Bad things happen in those cells late at night. Get my drift? Oh, and if my sister calls, don't tell her I'm picking up the dog. I'm planning to surprise her."

This one scares me more. Matty looked at Pretty Girl chewing on her bone, lying on the old pillow in the living room. They needed to be gone before Norma arrived. Matty glanced at the clock: 3:30 p.m. Before she could grab the dog leash, Matty heard a car's brakes

squeal to a stop outside her home.

She ran to the kitchen phone and tried calling the detective directly. She got his phone recording again. She stopped herself from dialing 911. Norma was right. Pretty Girl legally belonged to the Whitshaw sisters. Matty thought hard for a moment. She needed to buy time until the detective called her back.

Matty went to her desk and picked up her memo pad, then dialed the number written on it. The phone rang only once before someone picked up.

“Hello, Mrs. Critzen?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s Matty Cruz. I got your message, but your sister just arrived. Should I give the dog to her?”

“What the—Do not, I repeat, do not give the dog to Norma, you understand?”

“I don’t know how I can refuse—”

“Just keep the dog, damn it. I got your address from the vet. One second.” Matty heard Zelma talking to someone in the background. She came back on the line. “I’ll be over in few minutes. Give that dog to Norma and you’ll be in a world of hurt, do you understand, lady?”

Matty replied, “You better hurry. Your sister is determined to get the dog—and her collar.”

She hung up. *That should do it.* Someone began pounding on the front door. She went to her kitchen window and opened it a smidgen. A thin woman with what

looked like sores on her face appeared and stood staring at Matty through the screen and glass.

“Miss Whitshaw?”

“Mrs. Cruces?”

“It’s Cruz.”

“Yeah, whatever. Give me the dog and her stuff.”

“Zelma called.”

“God damn it. Open the door and give me the dog. I’ll take care of my sister.”

“She told me that under no circumstances I should give you Pretty Girl.”

Norma hit the glass with her fist and screamed, “Give me the goddamn dog or I’ll call the police, you bitch.” The glass rattled but didn’t break.

Matty’s heart pounded in her chest. She made herself reply in an even tone. “I don’t want to be in the middle of this. Your sister is on the way. Why don’t you two decide outside who gets the dog and the collar?”

An old Camaro pulled up in front of the house. Norma turned around to look at it. Zelma jumped out of the vehicle and ran toward her sister. Norma waited for her, with her hands on her hips.

“It’s my key!” they shouted, in unison. They began to grapple with each other. Zelma pulled the hair of the younger one while Norma bit her sister’s arm. Whoever dropped off the older sister took one look and screeched off.

Matty closed and locked her window, making sure to pull the café curtains tight. She grabbed a dining room chair and leaned it under the front doorknob. The terrier whimpered behind her.

“Don’t worry, Pretty Girl,” Matty murmured, picking the dog up and putting her in the back bedroom.

The phone rang. Matty hurried to answer to it.

“What?” she shouted.

“Miss Cruz?” a startled voice answered. “I’m Detective Phil Bester returning your—”

“The Whitshaw daughters are fighting outside. They want the key,” Matty interrupted.

Silence for a moment. “Give me your address.”

Matty recited it.

“I’m on my way. Whatever you do, don’t let those women in your house. They’re dangerous.”

“I already figured that one out. Please hurry.”

Eight

Matty chewed her fingernails, staring at the oven clock, counting the minutes since her phone call with Detective Bester. He must know that Zelma and Norma killed their mother for the contents of her safe-deposit box and now Matty stood in their way. *Two minutes*. Matty dropped her gnawed hand to her side. She heard the two Whitshaw sisters cursing at each other outside on her front yard.

Shouldn't Bester be here by now, leading the charge to save her from the two savages brawling outside her house? She strained to catch a bugle call or at least a siren, but the only sound she heard was Pretty Girl's whimpering at the bedroom door. The sisters had gone quiet. Perhaps they lay dead outside, each the victim of the other—or could the quiet signal something worse.

Matty abandoned her seat and stood before her kitchen sink, peeking over the curtains at the two sisters, their legs crossed, huddled on her lawn. Zelma looked the worse for wear, with a red mark on her arm and torn clothes. She waved her arm making smoke trails in the air with a burning cigarette, while she talked to her sister. Though Norma's mussed hair and grass-stained jeans showed her earlier combat with her sister, she now sat motionless, except for her eyes; those followed each movement of Zelma's cigarette. The younger sister's calmness scared Matty more than Zelma's fierce expression and violent gesticulating. Zelma finished

whispering to Norma and passed her the cigarette. Her sister took a long drag and flicked the butt onto Matty's mulched flowerbed.

Matty gritted her teeth and turned toward the clock. *Three minutes*. She couldn't resist checking on them again, and she observed Norma spring up in one movement, then bend down to aid her older sister. The two turned toward the house. Matty ducked, hoping they didn't catch her watching them. *Please climb into your car and go away.*

Boom, boom, boom. "Open up!"

"I called the police," Matty yelled back.

"Give us the damn dog, now."

"Never."

Matty could hear the two sisters conferring with one another, but she couldn't make out their words. She opened her hall closet looking for something that would serve as a weapon. She found a broom. She took a step into her tiny vestibule, planted her feet, and held the sweeper over her shoulder.

Bang! Both sisters slammed against the front door. The chair propped against it held firm.

Zelma yelled, "Give us the dog collar, and we'll go."

"We need the dog, too," Norma said in a loud whisper to her sister. "We just think the key is in the collar. Mom could have got that mutt to swallow it."

Horrified, Matty said, "Pretty Girl didn't swallow

anything.”

“Give us the key and we’ll leave the dog,” Zelma said.

“Give us the key or you and that dog are going up in smoke,” Norma said.

Matty shuddered. She knew who had burnt Agnes alive. Zelma might be a greedy lowlife, but Norma, insane Norma, trapped their mother inside the house and lit the flames.

“Break in here and see what happens to you two. I have a gun, and I’m not afraid to use it.” Matty took the dustpan off the broom handle, threw it in the air, and hit it with her makeshift bat. It made a huge clatter bouncing off the door. Not even close to a gunshot blast, still she hoped it was enough to put the two sisters off.

There was no reaction from the Whitshaw women. Matty craned her neck to read the clock. *Four minutes*. She heard footsteps retreating from her house. She scurried to the kitchen window and caught a glimpse of Norma releasing her car trunk lid.

The skinny, pocked-mark sister reached inside and withdrew a red container. Zelma yelled something at Norma and tried to grab it away from her. Norma refused to let go. They pulled the can back and forth between them, like two children fighting over a toy.

Matty felt herself teetering. Broad daylight, with the neighbors, no doubt, watching the scene, the police on the

way, and, yet, Norma wanted to set Matty's house on fire. Matty glanced at the clock. *Five minutes*. She couldn't wait any longer; she had to save herself and Pretty Girl.

Matty grabbed a key from the box in her junk drawer, then she reached into the trashcan underneath her kitchen sink. She glanced one more time at the two sisters still wrestling with the gas can.

Matty rushed over to her entryway, removed the chair, opened the door, and flung the collar with all her strength. The ripped plastic sleeve didn't hold the key for long, and it flew out. The brass bow made a ringing sound when it hit the front walk. Matty secured the door and went back to the window to check the sisters' reaction.

They dropped the gas can, and it fell back into the trunk. As one, they let out a whoop and dove for the key. Zelma managed to grab onto it first. Norma clawed at her sister's closed hand.

A siren sounded in the distance. The women stopped their brawling for an instant to listen. Norma attempted, one last time, to pry Zelma's fist open. Her sister socked her, and Norma fell back.

Sitting on her backside, she hissed, "You don't have a ride."

"And you don't have this," Zelma lifted her fist, the key peeking out between her fingers.

Having reached an understanding, they lifted themselves off their knees and sprinted toward the car.

Norma backed out of the driveway, tires squealing, the trunk lid snapping shut as the car peeled away.

Matty went to her whiteboard and wrote down the color and make of their vehicle. The angle from her kitchen window obscured the license plate number, but she glimpsed enough to recognize a Washington plate.

Two black and whites and an unmarked car with a flashing beacon stopped in front of her house. She turned to her oven clock. *Six minutes.*

The police officers ran toward her front door with their guns drawn. A tall, thin man, fortyish, climbed out of the unmarked car and hurried after them.

Matty stepped out onto her porch. “They’re gone. They went that way.” She pointed east.

The police officers trained their guns on her and shouted for her to get to her knees and place her hands behind her neck.

“But the Whitshaws are getting away.”

The officers didn’t seem to care and yelled at her again. Matty did what she was told.

“She’s a witness.” The thin man stepped between the cops and Matty. “Put your weapons away.”

They lowered their guns. The tall man extended his hand to her. “I’m Detective Bester. Are you okay?”

Matty let him help her to her feet. Even standing, she needed to bend her neck back to gaze into his face.

She nodded. “They drove east in an old blue Chevy

sedan with Washington plates. They've been gone less than a minute."

He nodded and trotted toward the uniformed men. After a brief conference, the officers clambered back into their cruisers and pulled away, sirens wailing and lights flashing.

The detective loped toward his car and folded himself back into the driver's seat. He shouted out the window to Matty. "Lock yourself in the house in case they come back."

He pulled his car from the curb and disappeared down the street. She didn't have time to tell him about the key. She'd better leave him another message. She noticed a few of her neighbors standing on their lawns, glancing at her and talking to one other. This was the most attention any of them had ever paid her. She scurried back inside before their curiosity overcame their aversion to a middle-aged stranger from California.

She paused to check the outside of the door for damages. It survived the Whitshaw's attempts to break in except for a few dirty shoeprints. Matty forced herself to leave everything as it was. Detective Phil Bester would probably appreciate that.

Matty hoped he brought back the key that she'd thrown at the sisters. The lease on her mother's safe-deposit box expired at the end of the month, and if Matty didn't mail the key back to the bank, they would charge her

for drilling the box open and installing a new lock.

Nine

The detective didn't ring Matty's doorbell until the dinner dishes stood drying on the drainer, Pretty Girl napped on the old pillow, and Matty sat, nodding off, in front of the television.

He stood waiting on her stoop, holding the key straight up between two fingers, with his brows raised. Matty waved him inside and went to the kitchen peninsula where Agnes Whitshaw's safe deposit key lay. Detective Bester laid her mother's key next to it, before placing Agnes' into a plastic baggy.

Pretty Girl barked at Detective Bester, her tail wagging at its usual rate.

He crouched down and petted her, much to Pretty Girl's delight. "She had it the whole time, huh?" Matty started to talk. The detective held up his hand. "I need to take a few notes. Can we sit down somewhere?"

Matty apologized and led him to the dining room table. She brought them both something to drink. Once seated, she told him every bit of the story. The detective listened, sipping on a glass of water, and writing on his pad. He interrupted her a few times to ask a question, but otherwise he did not comment on her tale. After she finished, he sat back and examined her like a scientist trying to classify a new specimen.

He dropped his pen. "Ms. Cruz, you're excellent at thinking on your feet, aren't you?"

Matty's face warmed from the compliment, and she sat up straight, smiling at Bester. It was nice to know she could still be useful.

"Though, it was clever to substitute the key, your actions put you at risk," he continued. "I know the dog drew you into this affair, but once the Whitshaw sisters came to your house and threatened you, you should have given it to them."

Matty's shoulders slumped. "I didn't want them to get it. They're horrible people."

"They are horrible. Norma Whitshaw is an unstable and violent meth addict, and Zelma has spent more time in jail than out since the age of eighteen. Lucky for you, we caught both of them, and they won't stop talking. They're blaming each other for the fire and their mother's death. Not that it matters. We have enough evidence to charge them with an array of felonies, including capital murder." He looked troubled. "Ma'am, a mature woman like you should know better—"

Mature? She knew what that meant. How dare he call her that? "I hope you aren't insinuating that I'm too old to handle myself, because you're wrong."

"Of course not. I was just saying—"

But his comment about her age was the last straw in a very trying day. Matty stood up. "I know exactly what you were saying."

Bester snapped his notebook shut and stood up, too.

“I’m sorry I offended you.”

Pretty Girl, who had been watching them, abandoned the pillow and jumped in front of Matty, facing down the detective. A high-pitched growl emitted from her throat.

Bester regarded Pretty Girl with the same look of surprise he’d given Matty earlier. “I hope you can control your guard dog as well as you did those two Whitshaw sisters.”

Matty covered her mouth, turning a laugh into a cough, and Bester’s face relaxed. With the tension in the room gone, the dog put her front paws on the detective’s knee, ready to make amends. He reached down and scratched her muzzle. Pretty Girl seemed to enjoy that.

He gave the terrier one last pat and straightened up. “Ms. Cruz, I’m thankful for your help, and I’m sorry for my clumsy words. My brother’s your age, and he’s certainly not old.”

Now it was time for Matty’s mea culpa. “I never meant to provoke the Whitshaws. I only wanted to find Pretty Girl a good home.”

Pretty Girl, hearing her name, went up to Matty and gave a yip. Matty headed for the treat jar, with the dog at her heels.

“Aren’t you the bravest little thing,” Matty cooed, before giving the terrier her biscuit.

Bester, watching them, said, “You found her the

perfect one.”

His words startled Matty into a moment of clarity. *He's right. Everyone is right. For better or worse, she's mine now.*

Detective Bester carried his water glass to her kitchen sink. “We’ve been working on building a case against the Agnes’ daughters since the fire. With your help and their actions today, our job is nearly done.”

“Even though I’ve accepted that they burnt their mother to death, I still have a hard time comprehending why they would do something like that,” Matty said.

Bester answered, “It’s a very unnatural thing to do. Keep this to yourself, but they took the batteries out of the smoke detectors, nailed the shutters shut over the windows, and padlocked the doors.”

“Yet, she still managed to outsmart them. What made them to hate her so much?”

“Those girls were wild from an early age, and Agnes Whitshaw disciplined them harshly. They never forgave her for that, but it was their greed that pushed them into murdering their mother. Agnes’ biggest mistake was telling the two what was in the safe-deposit box, and that she’d never let either of them profit from it.”

“I’m almost positive that Norma did the dirty work”

Bester gave a quick nod. “I’m inclined to believe that myself. It doesn’t matter. They’re equally guilty in the eyes of the law.”

“I guess Pretty Girl and I don’t need to worry about the Whitshaws coming after us again.”

Bester’s face looked serious. “The Whitshaw clan is a large one, and some of them are far worse than Zelma and Norma. Not that any of the family would bother to stand up for Agnes’s girls. They have their own nasty affairs to attend to. However, in case I’m wrong and any of them give you trouble, call me.” He handed Matty his card.

Matty’s stomach roiled. *More Whitshaws?* “Thank you—for everything.”

“You’re welcome.” He hesitated a moment before asking, “You’re new in town aren’t you?”

“Is it that obvious?”

He smiled. “And you live all alone here?”

She nodded. “Yes, and my neighbors haven’t been overly welcoming.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. My wife and I were born and raised in Couper, though we lived in Seattle for a decade. We returned a couple of years ago. Having moved away and came back again, people look at us funny, too” He paused, as if considering his next words carefully. “Couper looks quiet and peaceful to the outsider. That may have factored into your decision to move here.”

“I thought it would be the perfect place to retire.”

“It can be, but Couper has—undercurrents. Most folks here are hard-working, decent people, though,

unfortunately, not all of them are. Be cautious how and with whom you interact in the future, Ms. Cruz. You'll be safer that way."

"Thanks." High crime rate, pit bulls running around, Ring of Fire, undercurrents—maybe Matty in her haste missed a few negatives about the place.

"We'll need you to sign a statement."

"Anything I can do to help, I'm willing to do," she said, walking him to the door.

He shot her a speculative glance. "That's good to know. You're the type of person who could come in handy in the future."

He took two long strides off her porch before she called after him, "Detective Bester?"

He stopped and turned around. Matty a hundred questions racing in her mind settled on the most compelling one. "What's in that safe-deposit box?"

His face seemed to close down and shut her out. Then he shrugged. "I guess you deserve to know. Besides rubbing the ticket into her daughters' faces, the second biggest mistake Agnes made was not telling her nephew why she wanted him to stop by. He was the only one left in the family that she still had a friendly relationship with, and I suspect she wanted to surprise him with her good news and have him go with her to claim her prize. Too bad, Clyde kept putting her off."

"A ticket?"

He reminded Matty that what he was telling her was confidential. “A three-million dollar ticket out of poverty.”

That kind of money could have changed the world for the Whitshaw family. “Thanks for telling me. Will I hear from you soon?”

“You certainly will. Bye for now, Ms. Cruz.” With those last words, he climbed into his car and drove away.

Excerpt from *Killer in Couper*

Prologue

She walked into the living room, wearing a short, blue nightie that matched her eyes. Her blonde hair was wrapped in a towel, as if she'd just stepped out of the shower, and her face held a look of contentment, as if she didn't have a care in the world. That expression vanished once she saw him waiting in her living room.

“How did you get in here?” Alice demanded. She pointed to the door. “Get out. I told you I never wanted to see you again.”

His eyes went to her skimpy nightgown. “I had to talk to you one last time.”

“There isn't anything more to say. You need to leave—now.”

“You don't understand. I've thought this over carefully in my mind. No matter what we said before, I now realize that I'm willing to give up anything, everything to be with you.” He reached toward her in supplication. “Please, Alice—dear, dear Alice, give me a chance.”

Her face showed a mixture of disgust and horror. “You'll never touch me again. Leave now or I'll make you leave.”

He pleaded, “If only you'd listen to what's in my heart.”

“No!” she shouted and rushed toward him. She began to pummel him, her dark, blue eyes angrier than he’d ever seen them before.

He tried to grab her fists to stop her, but her small hands evaded his. As they struggled, his humbleness began to dissipate into bitterness. He’d come here repentant, willing to sacrifice all he valued for her, and she didn’t want him. The bitterness inside him began to smolder, until it grew into a spark of anger. After one of her blows connected with his cheek, he snapped, and he slapped her hard.

Alice pulled away from him, her hand on the left side of her face. She gave him one more look of pure hatred and ran out of the room.

He was mortified. He hadn’t meant to hit her. He should have expected her to react badly after he promised to leave her alone. He could feel the rational part of him begin to lose control. He made a mistake returning to her house. *I need to leave before this ends badly, for the both of us.*

Alice chose that moment to return to the living room. This time she was carrying a gun. “Get out, and don’t you ever dare come back here.”

He stared at the snub-nosed pistol. That she would be willing to shoot him shocked him. Whatever happened earlier, she must know that he loved her. He looked into her eyes, and the loathing he saw in them, the knowledge

that she didn't care anymore, pushed him over the edge.

Chapter One

Driving through the parking lot, Matty Cruz spotted the silver minivan parked in the back corner, bushes camouflaging the front of the vehicle. The public library had become a familiar haunt since she moved to Couper. With hours of free time and a small budget, reading books had become one of her few sources of entertainment.

Today, she had no plans to replenish her reading supply. She parked her green wagon in an unoccupied space, far away from the van. In hopes of keeping both warm and anonymous, she buttoned her jacket to the neck and pulled the hood over her head. Seeing only empty, parked cars, she exited her vehicle. She was still getting use to the weather in the Pacific Northwest and whenever she went out, the wet winter chilled her to the bone. This morning, the weatherman promised the driest day in two weeks. *Bring it on.* Matty was tired of huddling inside her house with her dog, Pretty Girl.

As instructed, she hurried to the silver vehicle she'd spotted earlier. She swung the front passenger door open and climbed into the seat. Pushing down her hood, she faced Detective Phil Bester.

“Why all the cloak and dagger?” she asked.

Dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, his blonde-buzz cut almost brushing the car's headliner, Phil sat sipping from a steamy cup. The smell of coffee tickled Matty's nose. The driver-side sunshield obscured Phil's face from

any passersby peering through the bushes. He reached over and turned Matty's visor down, as well.

"The other one is for you," he said, keeping his eyes on the windshield.

A second paper cup with a lid sat in the drink holder on the van's front console. She picked it up and took a sip: her favorite, a non-fat latte with cinnamon. She brought that same drink to the police station when she signed her statement concerning the death of Agnes Whitshaw. *He has a good memory. He must need it for his line of work.*

"Thanks. Why am I here? Are more Whitshaws after me and Pretty Girl or do you have something else in mind for me?" She knew the Whitshaw sisters accepted plea deals, and each had received a twenty-year sentence.

Bester shook his head, staring straight ahead and clutching his coffee cup like a handhold on a cliff face. The detective's obvious reluctance for calling the meeting was even stronger than the scent of the coffee. Fifteen years ago, she might have flattered herself and misinterpreted the reason for the clandestine meeting. She sighed. At fifty, most men were interested in her only if they wanted help or money. *And God knows I have no money.*

"Why did you want to meet like this?"

He continued to stare straight ahead. "How is Pretty Girl doing?"

"She owns me and the house. Phil—"

“The state gave Agnes Whitshaws’ nephew, Clyde, the proceeds from the lottery ticket.”

“Yeah, I read a follow-up story on that. Hope he spends Agnes’ money wisely.” Matty took another sip of her coffee. If Phil wanted to chitchat before getting to the point, she’d chitchat.

“Taxes took a chunk of it, and Clyde was in serious debt. He owed everyone in town, and that didn’t include his back child support and the IRS.”

“Some is better than nothing,” she commented, not caring about the nephew’s woes.

“He sank the rest into the Saxon Gas and Mini Mart. He worked at that gas station part time, and now he’s half owner.”

Matty’s brows went together. “I’ve been there before. Is Clyde a tall man around forty, tats on both arms?”

“That’s him. Don’t tell me you know him.”

“I ran into him once,” she said, remembering the cashier who cheated an old man out of his change. “He’s not an honest man.”

“He’s a Whitshaw,” Bester pointed out.

Matty nodded. That said it all.

She last spoke to Detective Bester a few weeks ago. Always courteous and to the point, he’d told her in a brief phone call that she wouldn’t need to testify in the case against the Whitshaw sisters. His attempt at idle chatter

today was unusual and further showed his reluctance for their meeting.

Matty, not the soul of patience, asked, “Get to the point, already.”

He drained his coffee cup and crushed it in his long fingers. “Matty, you’ve helped me out in the past with a few of my cases, and you did an excellent job.”

Matty liked hearing that. Since they first met, Phil had asked her a few times to do legwork for him in neighborhoods where she blended in well. Mostly, he needed someone unrelated to law enforcement to feel out possible witnesses who might be more comfortable confiding in her than talking to the police directly. She’d enjoyed doing it. It was better than staying home and reading rejection letters telling her she was over-qualified.

“This is different. It involves a personal matter and if the Couper Police Department knew I’d asked you to become involved, it might cost me my job.” He stared at the crushed cup in his hand as if it were his career.

Matty remembered the citations surrounding the Detective’s desk at the station. Even though he worked for a small police department, Phil appeared to be a hardworking professional who played by the rules. What personal matter forced him to break them?

“Don’t worry,” she assured him. “This meeting stays between the two of us.”

He placed the crumpled container back into its holder. “My wife, Iris, likes me to keep the van picked up. You should meet her someday.”

Next, he’d be pulling out pictures of his daughter, Tina, rather than telling her what this meeting was about. “Come on, Detective. I’m sworn to secrecy. Spit it out.”

“I’m not acting as a detective right now.” He rapped his fingers on the steering wheel for a few seconds. He stopped, and, finally, his gray-blue eyes met hers. “I hate to involve you in this, but I’m desperate. The situation involves my older brother—Sam. He retired from his government job two years ago and moved back to Couper the same time my family and I did.”

She remembered him mentioning a brother. “Did something happen to him?”

“Someone murdered his girlfriend.”

Shocking and tragic, but why would Phil risk his job and involve her? “I’m so sorry to hear that.” She lifted her cup to her mouth.

“The police think Sam did it.”

Matty took an unexpected gulp of her drink and choked. She wiped her mouth and the front of her jacket. “Don’t worry. I only spilt it on myself. Why do the police suspect your brother?”

“A week ago, neighbors saw Sam leaving the victim’s house late one evening. She told her friends earlier that she planned to break up with him that night.

The following morning, she didn't show up for work, and she didn't answer her boss's phone calls. A co-worker stopped at her house to check on her, found the front door unlocked, and Alice lying dead on the couch in the living room. She was shot through the heart."

"How horrible."

"The house wasn't broken into or robbed. The medical examiner says her body showed no signs of rape, and no semen was present. The murder shows all the earmarks of being committed by someone who knew her. Husbands and boyfriends are always first on the list of suspects. The lead detective thinks the victim breaking up with Sam gives him a motive."

"Your brother doesn't have an alibi?"

"He swears he was home alone during the timeframe the medical examiner established for her death. However, a neighbor of Sam's says she witnessed him entering the condominium building after that time period. Sam insists the neighbor's mistaken."

That sounded bad for Sam Bester.

"I need someone not associated with me or Sam to visit the victim's neighborhood and ask a few questions. Detective Dodge—he's in charge of the investigation—is only going through the motions, in my opinion. He'd love to pin the murder on Sam."

"That isn't right. Can't you protest how he's handling the case?"

“The prime suspect is my brother, and my supervisor gave me strict orders to keep out of it. With Hiram Dodges as the lead, I have no leeway at all. He isn’t looking to do me any favors.”

Matty waited for Phil to explain why Dodges would feel that way, but he didn’t.

“You must really believe in your brother to break the rules,” she said, hoping her words would prompt him to say more.

He brooded for a moment, before saying, “After college, Sam spent a lot of time overseas, and he only came back sporadically to visit the family. Though I was happy when he retired here, I was also surprised. I know he kept in touch with people in Couper through the years, but with my parents gone, I thought he’d pick a more cosmopolitan area to live. We were close when we were younger, and, in the last two years, I’ve tried to reconnect with him.” Phil shrugged. “He’s hard to get close to these days. Not that it matters. My parents would have expected me to help him, whatever the cost. He’d do the same for me.”

Matty pulled at her lower lip while she digested this. She finally said, “I don’t see my own brother much anymore. The last time we met was at my mother’s funeral. Ricardo’s changed a great deal since we were children together. You and Sam have been apart for most of your grown lives, and life alters people. Can you be

positive he didn't do it?"

Phil hit the steering wheel of the car hard with the palm of his hand, making Matty jump. "Sam isn't a murderer. He worked for the Feds for twenty-five years, for chrissake. If Dodges wasn't such a dickweed—I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it." Matty had worked with many men during her corporate life, and bad language didn't faze her. Though the expression "dickweed" was new to her, she rather liked it. It described to a tee a few of her ex-bosses and co-workers.

"Though it looks bad for him, Sam told me he didn't do it, and I believe him," Phil said.

Matty studied Phil's flushed face. He wasn't going to desert his brother even if the evidence against him was damning. Phil's professional objectivity might be clouded by a younger brother's blind devotion to an older sibling. Matty couldn't be sure.

"What do you think I can do to help you and your brother?"

"Your usual thing. Chat up Alice's neighbors. People always open up to you. You look so sweet and nice—everybody's maiden aunt."

Matty could feel her lips bend into a crooked smile. *After fifty years in the world, this is what people see.* "Thank you, I think." Still Phil's faith in his brother touched a nerve in her. "I guess I'd give Ricardo the

benefit of the doubt, too, if the police suspected him of murder. All right, I'll do what I can."

"One more thing you need to know concerning Sam."

Besides the fact that he may have killed his girlfriend? She shot Phil a sidelong glance. "Ah, he likes to pull the wings off flies?"

"It isn't that bad." Phil took a deep breath. "He dates younger women."

Matty clutched at her chest. "A man who dates younger women? I'm shocked, deeply shocked."

Phil's shoulders shook in laughter at her response. "Legal age, but half his age. He goes out with one for a few weeks or months then moves on. The girls know he isn't serious, and he parts with them amicably enough."

"Though not my thing, it sounds harmless. Is that the kind of relationship he had with the dead girl?"

"Alice McDonald made more of it to her friends. She told them her dumping him would break his heart, and she wasn't sure how he'd react."

"Sounds like a motive," Matty said.

"Damn him," Phil blurted out. "This wouldn't have happened if he'd met a decent woman—not a girl—and stayed with her. Most people his age are married." He glanced at Matty. "Not that there's anything wrong with not being married, I mean—"

Matty didn't blink at the comment. "That's okay. No

offense taken.”

“Sorry. Iris says that some experience in Sam’s life may have stopped him from forming close relationships with other people—especially women. Or maybe working for the government kept him too long on a straight and narrow path, and now he’s enjoying his freedom.”

Matty could understand that. She had spent all her life on that same path—and it dumped her jobless and broke in Couper, Washington. She felt reluctant sympathy for his brother. He wasn’t the only one tired of his—her old way of doing things. “None of that is a problem for me.”

Phil smiled at her. “My brother would like you.” His eyes narrowed, examining her face more closely. “Back in high school, you’d have been exactly his type—dark, brown hair and dark, brown eyes.”

Oh, oh. Another road she didn’t want to travel down anymore. She doubted Sam Bester would care for the silver strands entwined in her hair and the lines at the corners of her eyes. “Too bad I’m twenty-five years too old for his tastes, don’t you agree?”

He nodded, and his mouth turned downward. “I’m afraid so.”

Matty changed the subject. “How do you want me to approach this?”

Phil took the hint. “Go to Alice’s neighborhood and pretend that you knew her. I’ll help you with a cover story.

Find out who else Alice McDonald spent time with besides Sam. Any leads you uncover, a buddy of mine will shove under Hiram's nose. But like the other times you've helped me, your safety comes first. If anything odd happens or somebody acts suspiciously, walk away. Do nothing that will place you at risk."

Yeah, yeah. Matty had heard all of this from Phil before. "Didn't Hiram talk to the neighbors?"

Phil made a face. "Hiram Dodge's manner isn't conducive to getting people to open up." He looked hopefully at Matty. "So you'll help me prove my brother's innocence?"

Matty didn't know if anyone could prove Sam Bester's innocence. However, she'd spent too much time indoors, lately, trying to keep warm and dry. She'd even curtailed her daily walks with Pretty Girl because of the weather. She'd moved to Couper during the idyllic, early fall. Though she expected the winters to be harder than in California, the constant rain and the occasional snowfall took some getting used to. This little mission of Phil's might be what she needed to shake out the kinks.

"Of course." She would set aside her doubts about Phil's brother and do her best. Maybe she would try some real sleuthing this time. If he truly didn't kill his girlfriend, she might figure out who the murderer really was. *How exciting.*

Some of her thoughts may have shown on her face,

because Phil said, “I mean it, Matty. You’re only to talk to the victim’s neighbors to see if they’ve kept anything from us, nothing more.”

She gave him a wide smile. “I get it. Visit the neighborhood, ask a few questions, and keep safe. When do I start?”

Find out what happens next in *Killer in Couper*, *Matty Cruz Adventure Two*, or *Matty Cruz Adventures 1,2,3*, the attractively priced boxed set of the first three novellas in the series. Check my website at www.r-marquez.com to see where you can purchase either.

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<http://www.margidesmond.com/>.