

“The City Clerk and the Body in the Basement”

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In addition to my husband, our six children have been a driving force for me to continue through the years. In the time it has taken me to finish my studies, two of our daughters have also obtained bachelor's degrees. They have also blessed us with five grandchildren.

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Finally, and most importantly our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has been my rock and my salvation through everything. The lyrics of the very old, yet extremely relevant song by Russel Kelso Carter, "Standing on the Promises of Christ my King" have rung through my brain so many times over these years of completing this endeavor. I would like to recite them here.

"Standing on the promises I shall not fail.

Listening every moment to the Spirit's call

Resting in my Savior as my All in all

Standing on the promises of God"

Artist Statement

Writing has been not only my source of income, but also an avenue to display my own thoughts through the words of others for the past four decades. Being able to incorporate my own personality across the genres in written form has given me, and many readers, an expanded knowledge and enjoyment. While it is well known that writing has physical and mental health benefits, quite often writers don't realize how much of themselves is poured into their work.

This theory was especially true for me during the COVID years, when I worked, mostly alone, as the City Clerk for our small, rural town set in an agricultural valley in the farthest northern region of California. Fort Jones, formerly known as Scottsburg, Scottsville, Wheelock, and Ottitiewa, boasts just under 700 citizens and an uncompromised view of the majestic Marble Mountains. A beautiful setting, yet home to one of the dysfunctional city governments in the Scott Valley.

Background

Our tiny little town has a rich history and was discovered by Stephen Meek in the late 1840's. The area became a destination for westward bound settlers seeking gold and an abundant beaver population, whose pelts were almost as valuable. Not long after the influx of settlers the struggles with the native people began. Settlers invaded the valley and began to farm on Indian lands. As in many of the settlements in the Pacific Northwest, the U.S. Army built a small outpost just outside Fort Jones. Ultimately, the town was named Fort Jones (after one of the commanding officers) in 1852. The fort's one claim to fame was that Ulysses S. Grant had been deployed to the tiny outpost, but these orders were given during his alcohol-soaked days and he

never made it to the fort. The army only occupied the hastily built wooden structure for less than two years.

One local theory is that the fort was built solely to perform one function: exterminate a majority of the local native people. In order to free up the rich bottom land for the settlers, without fear of retribution, all the local tribes were invited to a feast. According to written accounts in the *Pioneer Press*, a local historical publication, over 500 braves and their families traveled to the fort. A large meal of beef was provided to the natives, which they readily ate, but only a handful noticed that the soldiers themselves did not eat the beef. It is from their accounts, as told to their descendants, that the story has been pieced together.

On the journey back to their villages, many the natives fell ill and died. The soldiers reportedly dug a large trough where many of the men, women and children were buried in a mass grave. The location of the mass grave is now the site of the Fort Jones Cemetery District. Other stories shared by word of mouth, detail account of the soldiers seizing the rich agricultural lands around the now defunct fort for themselves. These soldier, turned settlers, plowed the bones of the natives into the soil. Many of the family names of these soldiers are the same as those who possess the land today. A plaque listing the names is on a large granite boulder which stands in front of the Fort Jones City Hall, where I worked as the City Clerk from 2020 to 2023.

The City Hall resides in a 1930's era building which housed the High School in the 30's, 40's and early 50's. One of the greatest features of this creaky, spooky old building is the hand dug basement, complete with cracked cement walls with mysterious openings leading to the underbelly running the length of the former auditorium and stage area. I rarely descended into this dark, dank cavern, only to store boxes of outdated files and equipment.

It was during my three years working in this crumbling building that my creative manuscript, a novel, *The City Clerk and the Body in the Basement* came to be written. My tension-filled tenure as the town's main administrator epitomized the tumultuous and sometimes downright vicious relationship between town employees and the City Council. The elected officials wreaked havoc on my mental health as they put their personalities before the principles of the offices they held. Pushing their own personal agendas, they destroyed the once peaceful atmosphere we city employees enjoyed.

As an employee, I couldn't express my real thoughts and feelings regarding their actions. Not really understanding why, I began writing the spoofy melodrama, poking fun at the council members' foibles. Inventing scenarios in which their quirky and bumbling incompetence got them into one scrape after another helped my co-workers and I laugh while stifling the urge to cry. Writing was my natural response to the stress and strain of managing difficult personalities during a period of extreme national crisis, with ever-changing rules and regulations.

Impetus and Process

I have always been a storyteller. Living in this area where there are so many stories to tell has only increased my constant desire to write. I remember, as a young girl, spinning a particularly outrageous yarn that I had been visited by an angel who informed me that I would be the next mother of Christ. When I told my mother she said "Celeste, you have a vivid imagination." While she was exasperated with my frequent flights of fancy, I took her comment as a compliment. The stories in my head were as real to me as smack she landed on my bottom for being "sacrilegious."

I started writing as soon as I learned to read, and these two passions have been linked in my life since. Once I discovered the magic of reading, when a story bubbled up in my brain, I wrote on whatever surface was available at the time. I got serious about my addiction to the written word and produced my first newsletter with a kit of tiny rubber stamp letters when I was in first grade. It was an excruciatingly slow process of finding the right letters, pushing the stamp down into a little ink pad and then carefully arranging the letters into words, then sentences and finally paragraphs. My fingers were as black as the letters when I distributed my work to my family,

The urge to write could come on sometimes while I was outside playing with my many siblings, and then I would have to grab a sharp stick and start scribbling in the dirt before I lost the thought. Once, while riding my horse, I created a poem as we jogged around in lazy circles, the dust flying up from his hooves as the phrases took their places in the stanzas materializing in my mind's eye.

Writing was then, and still is, like breathing. Stories swirl around in my head throughout the most mundane chores, making my hands itch to get them out of my brain and onto paper. Looking at a fresh page fills me with the joy of creating the characters and spilling their stories from my head onto the page. Watching it knit together and exit my thoughts through my fingers on the computer keys and magically appear as a well-constructed story is always exciting and somehow comforting.

In my professional life, I have interviewed people from all walks of life. I developed a knack of getting my subjects to reveal themselves to me so that from their thoughts and words I could write interesting newspaper articles, magazine pieces, corporate communications and

public relations releases. My writing career provided a living for myself and my four children for almost forty years, but one thing I have always wanted to do was write a spoofy murder mystery.

My Vision for My Work

In my creative manuscript, I take pieces of all my favorite ‘Who Dunnits’, such as “Clue” and “Pink Panther”, coupled with romantic mysteries from my favorite librarian author, Jenn McKinlay, to produce a fun novel full of great scenery and relationships. As a young teenager, I babysat quite a bit, watching Charlie Chan movies late into the night waiting for the parents to return home. The battle of wits between the protagonist and antagonists in the black and white films was exciting and fulfilling. Chan, after a series of unfortunate and hair-raising adventures, always figured out the real culprits and saved the day before the end credits rolled. I think these experiences, coupled with binge reading Agatha Christie novels featuring Hercule Poirot, began my love of the melodramatic murder mystery genre.

The inspiration for my both my critical paper and my creative manuscript comes from my former teachers, editors, and favorite authors. In his book, *On Writing*, Stephen King writes, “Talent renders the whole idea of rehearsal meaningless; when you find something at which you are talented, you do it (whatever it is) until your fingers bleed or your eyes are ready to fall out of your head. Even when no one is listening (or reading or watching) every outing is a bravura performance, because you as the creator are happy” (2019). This quote resonates with me as a writer because I am happiest when I am writing and even happier when people who read what I have written tell me how much they have enjoyed the experience.

Literary Background

The critical paper section of the thesis explores how different authors, such as Stephen King, leave traces of themselves in their novels. So many great writers have been quoted about sharing their personal truth in their writing. The first that comes to mind is of course Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he said, “And the truth shall set you free.” In his courage in telling the truth, he set the stage for freedom of a horribly mistreated and brutalized part of our society and created the Equal Rights movement.

Like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi spoke about the importance of telling the truth, even if the cost of doing so was great. “Many people, especially ignorant people, want to punish you for telling the truth, for being correct, for being you. Never apologize for being correct or for being years ahead of your time. If you are right and you know it, speak your mind. Speak your mind even if you are a minority of one. The truth is still the truth.” (Ghandi, 1921). These quotes about sharing one’s truth is crucial to my thesis proposal in that I believe it when authors share themselves (their truth) in their writings which creates their successful fan following.

In his great work *The Truth of Masks*. Oscar Wilde wrote that “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” (Wilde, 1891). I found this to be amazingly true when I wrote under a pseudonym. It was especially freeing not to have my name involved and the piece flowed easily from my fingertips. My truth has been poking itself out into my writings, across all genres since I began writing. First person narrative, poetry, research papers, newspaper columns, readers that know me can find the pieces of me in the words, sentences and paragraphs that make up the bulk of my work.

Literary Context for the Work

I have spent much time reading other's memoirs and autobiographies because personal stories fascinate me. While I read, I have looked for clues to understand my craft and how I can best incorporate myself. When I find similarities between other authors and my own ideals, I pay especially close attention to the context of their words as well as their takeaways. How they describe how they picked up the pieces and moved on, what emotions they expressed and what they did with their emotions, that has helped me to do the same in my life, both personally and professionally. Their descriptions of how their family and friends reacted to their truth has helped to prepare me to accept how my own will digest my revelations in my future writing.

It was gratifying to learn that writing is an easier format than speaking directly to a friend or lover, not just for me, a student, but also for famous authors. In the "Letters of E.B. White", E.B. writes a letter to his wife explaining, "It is much easier for me to do this in a letter, typing away, word after word, than to try to tell you over a cup of coffee, when I would only stutter and grow angry at myself for inexactitudes or meanings (and probably at you too, for misinterpreting my muddly speech.)" (White, 1976).

Actors, like authors, have also been an inspiration. Val Kilmer in his autobiography shares how he put himself into his work and how the work became himself. "Just as I am a composite of my many characters, each character I've played is a composite of me." (Kilmer, 2020).

With regards to an affinity for the melodramatic, I feel that T.S. Eliot inspired me to write my characters bigger. I take his essay for the Criterion entitled "Recent Detective Fiction" to heart when developing my characters. He wrote, "The good detective story must avoid the

‘elaborate and incredible’ in the way of disguises, motives, scientific discoveries, machinery, and the character of the detective should be highly intelligent, yet not superhuman.” (Eliot, 1927).

The Significance of the Topic to Me as a Christian Scholar

My desire to share myself in writing, has always been inspired by my deep relationship with my Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. I believe that He gifted me with the ability to write. I take this gift seriously and am eternally grateful. The Scripture that has guided me in my writing career comes from the Gospel according to Matthew:

“Neither do men light a lamp, and put it under the bushel, but on the stand; and it shineth unto all that are in the house. Even so let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5 14-16, ASV).

Raised in a staunchly Catholic household, my siblings and I attended a parochial school and attended mass religiously on Sundays, Holidays, and any other day my mother deemed fit. To the outside world my entire childhood appeared to be based on God and his plan for me. While our “presenting face” to our school and church community was that of a highly intelligent, socially, and religiously conscious family, at home our “real faces” were much different: darker, uglier and at times evil.

It has taken me much time and work to disengage my spiritual self from those confusing and hurtful years. I was reborn in my Christian life as a light and gracious way to live and love. I know, without a doubt, without having a strong basis in faith, I would not be where I am today.

Writing melodramatic ‘Who Dunnits’ is a fun way to expose the “bad guy” in a lighthearted, yet still revealing way and the *City Clerk and the Body in the Basement* is no exception to this rule. I believe that good ultimately triumphs over evil. I believe in writing this

creative manuscript, I have grown closer to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the many years of classes and editing sessions I've experienced to get to this point.

While my text isn't of a specifically Christian theme, I wrote it as a Christian. I did not include curse words, nor any references to explicit sexual situations. I chose to write the best of each of the characters into their actions and dialogs, except of course for the villains, but even the 'bad guys' actions aren't malicious.

As my study of Stephen King's writing is a foundational basis for my critical paper, I would like to note that I am not a fan of his novels. His supernatural themes, as well as the extremely evil aspects of his main characters does not sit well with my Christian values. It is King's huge popularity with readers that drew me to exploring why his following is so vast, as well as my own distaste for his horror themes.

Conclusion

In reading other's reliance on their faith during the writing process, I have come to rely more and more on my own. Carl Jung said, "All that I have learned has led me step by step to the unshakeable conviction in the existence of God. I only believe in what I know. And that eliminates believing. Therefore I do not take his existence on belief—I know He exists." (Jung, 1955)

Throughout this process, I have looked for our Lord in each of the texts I used in my research. It was also my methodology to think of the author's relationship with the Divine when writing the different works. I believe having that as my background for investigation helped me see the author's truth and personality shining through the prose.

Writing Ourselves into Our Work

In all literature, “voice” refers to the author’s own unique tone, syntax, and vocabulary. Sentences, phrases, and paragraphs come together in a particular and recognizable manner. It is the readers’ affinity for and comfort with the author’s voice through his written creation which makes the work enjoyable and therefore, successful.

This thesis proposes that it is possible that when authors write themselves into their stories, that the inclusion of their personalities, life stories and personal biases that leads to fans developing a writer/reader relationship that determines the author’s success as a writer.

It is the authentic voice with whom readers identify and from which basis is formed for a successful writer/reader relationship. The resulting relationship is why readers choose one author over another, year after year, novel after novel, form around authors whose personalities, world views, characters and descriptive writing most closely resemble the readers.

It is my belief that successful authors imbed their own life truths, whether through their point of view, writing style, character development or narrative across all writing genres. Voice is the author’s personality shining through his written works. Without using his voice, an author’s words fall flat and can seem unrealistic to readers.

This paper provides evidence that it is the author’s use of his own voice in his writings that can resonate intimately with readers, creating the basis for a successful writer/reader relationship. The successful connection between the characters created by the author and the fan following built on the author’s successful integration of himself into his work is what ultimately propels the author to success. Conversely, the lack of protagonist affinity and understanding leads to the depths of literary obscurity.

The following pages discuss each of the following literary terms: point of view, writing style, character development and narrative and how they relate to the author's voice. Using several respected authors' own words, this paper explores how writers view themselves as consciously or subconsciously include themselves in their works. So much so, that at times, even when an authorship is in doubt, careful readers can deduce the truth of the creator's identity. Devoted readers can often deduce the author's voice in his characters and their own dialogue, even if the author is writing under a pen name.

Voice in Point of View

An author's Point of View is much like a singer's voice. One can hear an unfamiliar song, but recognize the artist, because the sound of his voice is readily identifiable. Writers, too, have a voice that we can hear across all the genres: Fiction, Nonfiction, Poetry, academic papers, and memoir. Authors, like singers, imbue their works with their voice, in ways so subtle, readers don't necessarily 'hear' it, but innately sense the sound. Readers, like music aficionados, who are familiar with certain authors, can hear the author's voice, and ultimately know their own specific point of view in their writings.

Voice includes such elements as word choice: a writer's vernacular is specific to them. The phrasing and colloquialisms, combined with their own vocabulary comes through the characters dialog. Scene descriptions are outlined and then colored in through the author's mind's eyes and into the readers.

While Point of View is defined as "the perspective from which a narrative is written e.g., as if telling one's own story (first person) or describing another person's actions (third person)" (Nicholson, 2014), there are subcategories within these two descriptors. The third person point of

view can be done in a couple of different ways, the all-knowing narrator (omniscient) is not constrained by the same rules as regular third person narrative. In third person, authors must establish limitations or guidelines and strictly adhere to these rules throughout the written work. The character being described must stay in character through the novel, not stepping outside the boundaries established or risk credibility with readers.

An author, whether writing in first person, third person or omniscient third person talking in the first person, uses their own voice through their unique perspective, beliefs, and opinions, as well as biases that spill over and leave his mark on his work. The practice of biographical criticism has been applied further in this essay to support this claim. For example, Stephen King was a practicing alcoholic while writing many of his early works. His characters, such as Jack Torrance in *The Shining* and Peter Sheldon in *Misery*, closely resemble King. Both are writers, like King, and both are alcoholics, like King. In addition, Sheldon was an English teacher, as was King. The author acknowledges this fact, writing, "I was...the guy who wrote *The Shining* without even realizing...that I was writing about myself." (King, 2000).

Because voice is apparent in point of view, choosing which to use is a critical step for writers, and a personal one. According to famous author, book editor and publisher Sol Stein, "The major decision...is which point of view to use. Some of the authors I've worked with have an instinct for one or another point of view based in some measure on their experience as readers. Those who write thrillers usually write in the third person. Those whose reading has been mainly literary are more often tempted by the first person but that still leaves a large terrain in the middle." (Stein, 1995).

First person point of view can be mixed with third person narratives to describe the main character, as well as to add action to offstage scenes. Dialogue from different character's

perspectives can provide a sense of action and create a range of sense from each one, but it is always the author who decides who says what and how they say it. Their personal lexicon spills over into their character's dialect, worldview, personal opinions and communication styles.

For example, Stephen King also wrote under the penname Richard Bachman. It has been opined that he chose to use a pseudonym because he wanted to find out if his books sold because of his name, or if they were actually well written. The first book he published as Bachman was written in 1966 as *Getting it On* but was released as *Rage* in 1977. A reality-based psychological thriller, the novel features a high school student with an abusive father, who has faced difficult situations throughout his short life. He explodes and unleashes mortal violence on his teachers and classmates, after forcing them to reveal their own stories of abuse and neglect.

Four years earlier, King had used the same point of voice in *Carrie* but instead of being reality-based, the main character possesses cosmically destructive telekinetic powers. His debut novel, which was later made into a wildly successful horror film, features a teenage girl with an overly religious abusive mother. When she defies her mother and tries to integrate into regular society, she is humiliated by her classmates. She then calls on her supernatural abilities to get even using horrifying violence on an obscene scale.

The two works share the same storyline, same deadly outcomes, but unfortunately, *Rage* was regarded as inspiring mentally ill high school students to act out the tragic and often deadly storyline. Four such incidents occurred leading to in-school hostage taking and murder. In 1988 a California student, Jeffrey Lynn Cox, held his High School Humanities class hostage, the following year, a Kentucky student did the same. In 1996, a Washington state student killed his algebra teacher and two classmates, and in 1997 a Kentucky 14-year-old held a prayer group hostage. All four stated they had been influenced by the novel, and one even had a copy in his

school locker. Ultimately King and his publisher New American Library, made the decision to pull the book from sales. On the flip side, *Carrie*, the fantastically over the top teenage horror film, has gone on to become a cult classic, grossing over \$33,000,000 in 1976 (The Numbers, 2024).

King, the most well-known successful horror writer of the 20th Century, voice carries unmistakably through his work, even though he was able to write under Bachman for several years. When his fifth Richard Bachman novel, *Thinner*, which featured a supernatural theme, rather than the realistic scenarios used in *Rage* (1977), *The Long Walk* (1979), *Roadwork* (1981), *The Running Man* (1982), that suspicions were confirmed as to Bachman's real identity. The publication dates used are to highlight the volume and frequency of King's published novels.

King had started inserting pieces of himself in the books, while writing as Bachman, almost as if giving clues to his readers. In *Thinner*, a character opines, "You were starting to sound like a Stephen King novel there for a while..." Now, he and his son, author Joe Hill, share characters that cross over into each other's novels. Their voices blend as their literary creations transcend this world into their own written fantasies, while forming a universe of their own making.

Voice in Writing Style

Writing style is the voice and tone a writer uses to convey a story or express their ideas. Every writer has their own writing style based on what words they use and how they use them. Writing style also includes how they structure their sentences and their level of formality. This can also be described as how they approach writing. Writing style is another way to describe an author's voice, and to denote whose style we fall in love with as readers.

The writer's voice is found in narrative if the writing is of substance. The inclusion of the writer's personality may be unintentional or a conscious decision, but happens, nonetheless. In the time-honored and much quoted text, *The Element of Style*, the authors caution, "A careful and honest writer does not need to worry about style. As he becomes proficient in the use of language, his style will emerge, because he himself will emerge, and when this happens, he will find it increasingly easy to break through barriers that separate him from other minds, other hearts, which is, of course, the purpose of writing..." (Strunk and White, 1979).

Two outstanding literary giants, Ernest Hemingway and Leo Tolstoy have decadently different writing styles, yet both have huge readership followings. Each are considered masters of the writing craft who used their voice in their writing style to convey their truths. Their readership followings are as divergent as their writing styles.

It is relatively simple to deduce a Hemingway piece from one written by Tolstoy. Hemingway favored clean, short sentences. His style, or his voice, was direct and clear to the point. For example, "I'm clear enough in the head," he thought. "Too clear. I am as clear as the stars that are my brothers." (Hemingway 1952). Hemingway explained his writing style this way, "I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There are seven eighths of it for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate, strengthens your iceberg." (Hemingway, 1958).

Tolstoy, on the opposite end of the spectrum, wrote in his own complex style. From his 1879 autobiographical rewrite, Tolstoy, then 51 years of age, wrote *Confession*, an account of his spiritual crisis. He wrote, "In spite of the fact that I was convinced of the impossibility of proving the existence of God (Kant has shown me, and I fully understood him, that there can be no such proof), I nonetheless searched for God in the hope that I might find him, and according

to an old habit of prayer, I addressed the one for whom I searched and could not find.” (Tolstoy, 1844).

William Zinsser (1922-2015), writer, editor, and Yale Professor, called the author’s point of view voice “style.” Commenting on E.B. White’s *The Hen*. He states. “I like the rhythms, the unexpected but refreshing words (deified, allure, cackling), the specific details...but mainly what I like that this is a man telling me unabashedly about a love affair with poultry that goes back to 1907. It is written with humanity and warmth, and after three paragraphs, I know quite a lot about what sort of man this hen-lover is.” (Zinsser, 2006). Zinsser didn’t care about chickens, but he admits he liked the passage because he admired White’s writing. Beautiful, inspired writing can change us and the way we live our lives.

Salman Rushdie encompasses Zinsser’s thought so beautifully when he writes, “I believe that the books and stories we fall in love with makes us who we are, or, not to claim too much, that the act of falling in love with a book or story changes us in some way, and the beloved tale becomes part of our picture of the world a part of the way we understand things, and make judges and choices in our daily lives.” (Rushdie, 2021).

In seeking guidance, Christians look to the authentic and motivational writings of the Bible, and here took is proof that writers’ signature is stamped into their words, no matter how many centuries has passed. But in ancient times, it is not so much about who the actual writer was, but how they incorporated their truths.

Writing style was used to deduce who (or what group of authors) wrote the different gospels of the New Testament. While many believe that several authors’ accounts were compiled to create the epistles, those works accredited to John are decidedly different from the other three.

The author, linked to the disciple John, wrote with a distinctly spiritual style, rather than the historical chronology of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. “John” did not include any parables or firsthand accounts. Mark is credited with writing the earliest and most historically accurate of the four gospels (Bible Archeology Society, 2023), Matthew and Luke followed his style.

As with readers and researchers, authors know the writing styles from whose voice they draw inspiration. Bassey Ikpi, a Nigerian American writer, self-proclaimed ex-poet, drew introspective acclaim from like-styled authors for her 2019 collection of essays, *I'm Telling the Truth, but I am Lying*. In her breakthrough collection of essays, she details her mental health struggle as a young Nigerian author. “What if truth is not the place where reality and memory meet?” she questions in her essay *Young Girls, They Do Get Weary*.

Bestselling author Michael Arceneaux, best known for his 2018 work, *I can't date Jesus: Love, Sex, Family Race and Other Reasons I've put my Faith In Beyonce* comments on Bassey Ikpi's writing style in this way, “in this collection of essays, Bassey writes about such different subject matter with gorgeous prose,, effortless wit, a searing level of honesty and vulnerability coupled with a level of self-awareness you yearn for from compelling memoirists,” (Arceneaux, 2019).

It is this ‘level of honesty and vulnerability’ which includes Ikpi's voice throughout the work. Akwaeke Emezi, author of *Freshwater* echoes Arceneaux's thoughts on Ikpi's work. “The writing is blade-sharp, precise and evocative, brilliant and graceful as it articulates an embodiment that has been both misrepresented and left unseen in our culture for far too long.” (Emezi, 2019).

Voice in Character Development

Like Stephen King, other consistently successful authors with fan readerships also leave their unique imprint on their works through personalization of their main characters. King writes, “The job boils down to two things: paying attention to how the real people around you behave and then telling the truth about what you see...in real life we each of use regard ourselves as the main character, the protagonist, the big cheese; the camera is on us baby.” (King, 2000).

Other authors agree that relatable characters start with reality. Many share their techniques for creating characters with whom readers not only identify, but also admire. Bestselling murder mystery author Janet Evanovich credits observation as key to developing successful protagonists.

Evanovich explains character development this way, “All writers are people watchers. If you want characters that ring true, take a really close look at the people around you...I also take clues from real life. Many of my daughter’s disastrous dating experiences show up in my books in one form or another. Everyday life is a limitless resource.” (Evanovich, 2006).

Readers agree that relatable characters are the ones that not only capture their attention but have a predictable and enjoyable personality. “I can always tell a Harlan Coban novel. His character development is all over the place, but by the end of the book he brings it all together,” avid political thriller reader Jeff McFall relates. “And with Vince Flynn’s character Mitch Rapp, you know it is always going to end up well.”

A devotee of Flynn novels, McFall was interested to learn that Kyle Mills took over writing the Rapp series when Flynn passed away in 2013. Labeling himself a ‘die-hard Rapp fan’, Mills finished Flynn’s final novel *Survivor* in 2015, and then went on to write several more

in the Rapp series. The similarity between writers' treatment of the protagonist keeps Flynn's style and Rapp's character true to form. Most readers can't deduce the difference between Flynn's writing and that of Mills. "Fans were astonished to know that Vince only wrote three pages of the novel," commented Ryan Steck on "Real Book Spy". As a devoted reader, Mills was familiar with Rapp's character, his personal code of ethics, his religion, his societal beliefs and his speech and mannerisms.

Flynn, who sought to be an aviator for the Marine Corps, was disqualified from Officers Candidate School a week before he was to enter the service due to his dyslexia. His character, Rapp, suffered no such affliction, and went on to become an American fictional hero when his creator was denied the opportunity due to his disability. The author created his character fulfilling his own personal aspirations.

Emily Best, Simon and Shuster editor is the only person to edit the Rapp series. She noted "Mitch (Rapp) speaks for grassroots America. So his opinions, his actions, his alliances, his enemies, all make sense to your average American with a lot of common sense and a lot of skepticism of the government. Mitch goes out and does all the things we would love to do, but don't get the chance too." (Best, 2023).

Voice in Narrative

As with point of view, writing style and character development, the words that writers use to build narrative also stem from their own voice. Zinsser terms narrative "gold old-fashioned storytelling...it is what should pull your readers along without them feeling the tug." (Zinsser, 2006). Writers are instructed to 'write what they know', something King does

successfully, time and time again. “It...is something that should be used by any artist, for it is through these details that true feelings can be recording onto the paper.” (Smythe, 2015).

Where do the words come from? The author decides what their characters are going to say, how they are going to say it and when they say it. In her text *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard suggests that the words an author writes dictates the voice of the work, and that these words are from not only their own voice, but from that of their families, friends, and ancestors.

“When you write, you lay out a line of words,” Dillard wrote. “The line of words is a miner’s pick, a woodcarver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it and it digs a path you follow.” (Dillard, 2013). Dillard created imagery to define an author’s point of view voice. What is not stated is that the author is wielding the miner’s pick, or woodcarver’s gouge and the surgeon’s probe. The author wields the story and follows its path, but the path is, consciously or unconsciously, the author’s voice leading them to tell their own story.

Not that all narrative must be based on personal truth, but rather personal belief in the truth. Rushdie relates this idea best, writing, “And I remember the stories that made me all in love with literature in the first place, tales full of beautiful impossibility which were not true, but by being not true told the truth, often more beautifully and memorable than stories that relied on being true.” (Rushdie 2021).

Narrative floats across the genres and comes to land on poetry. Pulitzer Prize winner, the poet Mary Oliver shares how narrative pulls readers in for a good time. “...when we listen to the narrative poem, we are comfortable. We are engaged and at times, entranced, we can listen for hours. We do not love anything more deeply than we love a story—narrative is at the center of all literature.” (Oliver, 1994).

Conclusion

An author, through his use of point of view, in his development of his writing style, how he builds the characters that act out the scenarios and the narrative he tells through them, shares his voice with his readers. In telling his stories, in fiction, or nonfiction, poetry or screen play, he shares himself his truth, his belief and his worldview.

When this happens, readers begin to know and sometimes idolize the authors, devouring their works and discussing their takeaways on online forums. Readers of certain authors form communities and fan bases. It is the author who brings together diverse groups through the craft of storytelling.

If a beloved author passes away, other authors can effectively mimic their voice to continue the fictionalized character's life, so that they can live on in their reader's imaginations. Another author might retell stories from the past in a contemporary way to keep the original author's voice alive for future generations. Voice is at the heart of all author's stories; it is what makes a competent writer a good writer and a great writer immortal.

Claire

Claire rolled over and stretched sleepily as sunlight began to wake the colors of the gingham curtains covering her bedroom window. Moving to her left side she timed her breath with her stretches as she worked her muscles slowly. Yawning broadly, she felt deliciously languid, and had just started to open her eyes when her golden shepherd licked Claire's nose excitedly. Bolting upright, Claire was now fully awake.

“Gracie--NO!” Claire groaned loudly as she pushed the puppy's face away from hers. “Really? *Really?* You must learn to sleep in,” Claire instructed her four-legged best friend. Getting out of bed more quickly than she really wanted, the sheer joy of the dog's animated wiggling made her smile instantly.

“Alright! Alright, I get it, I get it, it is time to go outside.”

Claire patted the dog's head and ruffled her soft ears, marveling as always how the canine can instantly go from irritating her to making her laugh.

“I do love you, you know that, right? I would just appreciate it though, if you could wait until the sun was all the way up in the sky before you decide to wake me up.”

Claire pulled a Southern Oregon State University sweatshirt over her blue t-shirt and slid into her sweatpants, revealing a lithe body and gorgeous legs. Stuffing bare feet into Ugg boots was made almost impossible by Gracie's idea of ‘help.’ Hoping to calm the dog's exuberance, she tried a more soothing tone.

“Give me a minute, I can't walk across town, looking like this!” Claire ran a hand through her auburn curls, tucking them under a dark gray ball cap whose embroidery proclaimed

to the world that she was a 'Dog Mom'. She followed the bounding four-legged out the side door of her small downtown blue bungalow and into the fresh morning air.

Life as a dog mom was a new experience for Claire, but a necessary one. Gracie was more than just a pet; she was Claire's Emotional Support Animal. Last year, after Claire's parents died in a snowy car crash, her psychiatrist has prescribed a companion to help with her anxiety and overwhelming depression. The suggestion had been a life-changer and now Claire could never imagine not having the adorable 70-pound fur baby in her home and at her side.

Attaching a leather leash to Gracie's pink reflective collar, the pair crossed the quiet street and walked past the City Hall where Claire worked as the City Clerk. Growing up in small, rural mountain town she knew that she had to become an integral part of her hometown's future. As a Junior High Student, Claire had organized her peers into "Community Assistants." The group, consisting mainly of Claire and her closest friends assisted seniors with simple needs. They mowed lawns, swept porches, walked dogs, and made close relationships with the long-standing residents.

The early morning cool fall air felt good on her face as a surge of pride in her town filled her heart. Grazing out to the majestic Marble Mountain range, she noticed there was a dusting of snow at the highest elevations. This was her favorite time of year. The trees lining the streets were edging toward the golds, ambers and rusts of the season. Mixed with the deep greens of Jeffrey pines, the rich color pallet mixed with the cooler temperatures, signaled the end of another long dry summer. Gracie, leading the way, automatically turned toward the park, but Claire stopped her.

"Oh no, we aren't going to play just yet, I definitely need coffee first!"

Passing the few houses on the block, Claire had to stop and wonder why her neighbor Virginia had been compelled to paint her house that shade of purple. She crossed the street in front of the vibrant violet home, and headed past the ancient block Mason's Hall with its square, compass, and the letter G.

The daily battle between the river of fog snaking its way up the valley and the power of the sun's rays began. A small herd of four deer grazed in the small lot of rich clover and alfalfa near the Mason's Hall. Their heads raised as they carefully watched the pair of travelers as the sun continued its valiant fight against the thick white tunnel of precipitation trying to overcome the bright blue of the morning sky.

After securing Gracie to the handmade bench featuring running horses set in iron on the backrest adorning the wooden porch circling the Western-theme false-fronted building, Claire entered the "Gifted Horse" the town's only coffee shop and local hangout. Her best friend, Emma, the owner and chief cook and bottle washer, looked up from the espresso machine and smiled. She finished making several lattes for the quilt group chattering excitedly at the largest table in the middle of the rustically decorated brick shop. After delivering the steaming hot mugs, Emma gave her friend a quick hug.

"Wow, you are up early today! Let me guess...Gracie decided you needed to get a head start on work today," Emma surmised. Holding up a to-go cup, she nodded to Claire. "Would you like a cinnamon roll with this? I just got them out of the oven and they are delicious!"

Even though she was tempted by the heady spicy aroma permeating the small diner, Claire declined, shaking her head.

“No, I can’t imagine trying to hold onto Gracie, drink coffee and manage a cinnamon roll, but thank you for the coffee!” Taking a sip of the magic brew, Claire continued, “I know it is early, but it is just as well. Tomorrow night is the City Council meeting, and I have a lot of work to do to get ready for it.”

Claire grimaced as she took a second sip, as much from the thought of dealing with the two new council members as at the bite of the hot liquid.

“It is the first meeting for Susan and Howard as new members, and I am trying really hard not to imagine what agenda they are going to bring to the table.”

Suddenly, a sharp bark from the front porch pulled Claire’s thoughts away from the dreaded meeting. Quickly smiling at her friend, she waved good-bye, clutching her coffee in one hand, the door’s bell ringing brightly behind her as it banged shut. The sun was gaining strength as it climbed over the mountains that ringed the valley where they lived. The forest of pine trees at the end of town changed from dark brown to their usual green as the sky lit up. More colors came into focus as the fog retreated deeper into the interior. Fort Evans was lucky that way, as the closest town to Forest Mountain, it rarely was enveloped in the fog as the rest of the valley.

Claire turned her face up to the sun before quickening her step to keep up with the year-old shepherd.

“Well, I certainly don’t have to worry about gaining weight with you around, do I?” she said to the excited dog as they raced down the street, already wishing she had accepted the cinnamon roll. Slowed down by her cup of coffee, she and Gracie traversed the length of the town at a more leisurely pace than Gracie liked. They strolled past the long row of brick circa 1860s buildings which included the town’s sole bank, school district office and Post Office

before coming to a stop in front of the hardware store. The shop's owner, Elmer was, as usual, waiting with a dog biscuit for Gracie and a kind word for Claire. Having lived in Fort Evans since childbirth, he knew all too well about town politics and the challenges his favorite City Clerk was currently facing,

Elmer

Elmer had been a good friend to Claire, especially after her parents' passing. He and her father, George, had grown up together in Fort Evans. They were classmates and enjoyed hunting Indian treasure in the vast fields and hills outside town. The had a reputation for alternately tormenting and then delighting their Elementary school teachers, all the while building a strong friendship.

While Elmer had inherited the hardware store, Claire's father had gone on to work for Cal Trans, helping to carve the two-laned single pass highway into the valley from the County seat, over the treacherous Forest Mountain. It had been a foggy early morning when Claire's parents, on a trip over the hill, had met their fate. The highway patrolman who found them in the wreckage surmised that a deer crossed their path, causing them to overcorrect and crash. The only consolation Claire had was that her mother and father died instantly and together.

Because of his friend's passing, Elmer had tried to look after Clarie the best he could. Her daily walks with her shepherd had given him the perfect opportunity. After giving the puppy a treat, he reached down to pet her soft ears. Claire noticed the pensive look on his usual cheery countenance, and she realized there was more on his mind than the typical morning pleasantries. She was about to question him, when he abruptly asked Claire if she had heard about the latest town gossip.

“Oh no, what now?” Claire exclaimed, tensing yet trying to remain calm.

Using the techniques she had learned from her counselor, she took a few deep breaths and focused on Gracie. Next, she tried using humor to diffuse the alarm she felt rising in her core.

“Let me guess, Susan and Howard have decided to change the name of the town,” Claire joked as she caught her breath after her brisk walk. Elmer smiled at her, knowing full well how many times the tiny town had had its name changed.

The story was an old one, as Fort Evans underwent four renditions in the first six years of its incorporation. Starting as “Scottsburg,” the first City Council decided that “Scottsville” was better. Once a new City Council took over, they changed the name again, to “Ottitwea,” but the obvious issues of pronouncing the name as well as spelling it correctly, ultimately led the officials to finally opt for Fort Evans. Now long gone, all that remained of the Army outpost was a wooden flagpole and a plaque commemorating the commanding officer, General Evans.

“I wish it were that simple!” The older man laughed at the memory, before turning serious as he continued.

“But no, unfortunately they have decided they have the authority to fire Ken.”

Her breath tightened, Claire had known that Susan and Howard had no love for her boss but did not think they could take it this far. Sure, they had it out for him because he wasn't a local, and of course Howard had his own axe to grind with Ken. The duo had run for City Council based on a platform to return the town to the simple lifestyle of their childhood. The concept must have been popular with most of the residents because they had beaten out all the other candidates. They would officially take their seats at the next evening's council meeting.

Claire's expression turned grim as the two discussed the newest city council members' hatred of the City Administrator.

The older man continued, “it is because Ken was forced to remove Howard from the Fire Department after his affair with Susan became public knowledge,” surmised Elmer, who was a member of the Fire Department Auxiliary.

“And Howard’s public accusations that the city stole hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Fire Department only fueled the flames,” he said turning his attention once again to the velvet fur on the pup’s ears.

Claire nodded and realized that most of the problems started when Ken was hired by the outgoing City Council members. Ken’s resume was impressive with years of experience as a City Administrator working with large cities in southern California. His qualifications didn’t add up to a hill of beans in the current council’s eyes. He wasn’t a local and according to popular town sentiment, nonlocals were not to be trusted with anything!

Elmer shifted his feet nervously. Claire looked at her oldest and dearest friend. An Army veteran, Elmer had the bearing of a military man. He always stood straight and tall, and his character shadowed his stance. Slow to anger and quick to help, Elmer was Claire’s rock.

“They’ve had it out for Ken ever since,” he explained. “Howard’s ego was bruised when he had to resign as Fire Chief,” Elmer continued.

Claire nodded while rubbing Gracie’s tummy. Being a valley native, she knew from experience that others had done far worse but had not lost their positions or town status. “But the final straw for Howard was that Ken exposed him as an adulterer, and Howard’s position as Deacon in the Church was over immediately.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that,” Claire exclaimed suddenly, startling the pup to a rising stand. “I could not imagine being able to go to Church. I love teaching Sunday School and getting to

sing with Maureen just makes my heart swell!” Gracie, sensing her owner’s distress, rubbed her tawny sides against Claire’s fleece covered legs. Claire, thinking of Maureen, the current Mayor, and head of the council, realized that it would take a block of three to fire Ken.

“They need a third vote to do that. By law because there are five people on the City Council, three votes are needed for a majority. Susan and Howard are brand new; they cannot possibly have a third.”

The idea of losing her boss and mentor filled her stomach with dread. Realizing her coffee cup was empty and she still hadn’t had breakfast, she felt a sudden need to get home as quickly as possible.

“Well, the talk is that Diane is going to join them,” Elmer continued. “She doesn’t care for anyone in a position of authority, but having someone not from the Valley running Fort Evans really gets her goat.”

Claire shook her head in dismay, not only at the thought of a contentious City Council meeting, but also wondering how she might persuade Diane to reconcile her feelings for Ken.

“That would be horrible, Ken is what is keeping this town from going bankrupt, he has written so many grants and they are all just now coming to fruition.” Her mind went to the promise of the state park grant, which would provide many local jobs, but also do much to improve the town’s atmosphere. Shaking her head, she glanced at her watch and knew she had to get going.

As if sensing her thoughts, Gracie yanked on the leash, and almost pulled Claire into the street. Silently thanking her companion, Claire immediately released her grip and started off, calling to Elmer over her shoulder

“I’ll see you tomorrow!”

Elmer nodded his head in agreement and offered a quick prayer for the daughter of his departed friend.

“Yes, I will be there, don’t cha worry!”

Elmer turned back into the hardware store as the dog and the young woman disappeared around the corner. He cared a lot about Claire, as he was the one who had to give the news about her parents’ fatal accident. The shock of losing his childhood friend had hit him hard and he could only imagine how Claire must feel. He was glad that she had Gracie to help her cope. While he did his best to help her as much as he could in her increasingly stressful job, sometimes it was only to lend an ear and a dog biscuit.

Hannah

After finishing the dog's walk and her hastily gulped coffee, Claire thought about the problems the new city council members were creating in their vendetta against her boss. These unsettling feelings continued as she showered. She exchanged her sweats and Ugg boots for slacks and coordinated blouse and slid her feet into low heeled comfortable shoes. Grabbing a fresh blueberry muffin, she sunk her teeth into the fruity pastry. Her mind filled with thoughts of the upcoming potentially contentious council meeting.

Ken had only been the City Administrator of Fort Evans for the past four years, but in that short time he had been able to pull the town from the brink of financial collapse. It was a great feeling to know the ledgers were in the black and there were grants to pay for much-needed infrastructure improvements. Her face clouded as she applied mascara. If the rumors were true and Diane was going to cast the deciding vote to remove Ken from office, all his hard work could come crashing down and the town could once again face financial disaster.

Pushing the unsettling thoughts from her mind, Claire and Gracie once again walked across the tree-lined street. Claire noticed that the row of maple trees was beginning to change color with the season. Jogging up the front steps of City Hall, she unlocked the heavy front door. She could hear strains of Rachmaninoff's Fifth Concerto in D Minor coming from her office and her mood lifted. Smiling, she opened the door to greet her young assistant, Hannah.

"Good morning!" Hannah turned down the music coming from her computer speakers. Getting up from her desk at the front counter of the tiny office, she took five steps to grab a cup of tea from the kitchen area. Claire settled Gracie in her dog bed under her desk before the office's only window. Last year Mayor Maureen had repainted the office a pleasant pale green

and had added gingham curtains, and the look was professional, yet homey. She had sat down and turned her computer on and immediately opened her email. Hannah brought her a steaming cup of aromatic tea. Claire smiled her thanks.

Claire admired her young assistant. Hannah had only moved to the valley a couple of years ago, but she felt like family. As Hannah took her seat at the front counter desk, Claire was struck again by her timeless beauty.

Hannah's thick long brown hair reached almost to her knees. Most days she had it tied up in braids or a bun, as when it was down it sometimes got caught in the rollers under her desk chair. With a creamy white complexion and cupid's bow lips, she could have been a model for the 1920's bathing suit advertisements. Strikingly old-fashioned, her taste in music ran to classical, but she was also a wizard at electronics. With a dual degree in Art and Social Media, Hannah had helped bring Fort Evans to the digital age, complete with a town website and an Instagram account.

"Alright! Looks like there are no more changes to the council meeting agenda or the agenda packet, so let's finish it up!" The two young women continued preparing the board binders with the necessary documentation to support the agenda's items. Listening to classical music and sipping tea, they worked companionably for almost three hours before Claire looked up at the clock and sighed.

"Well, I think we're ready for tomorrow's meeting," Claire said ruefully, and went to take a drink of her now surprisingly empty teacup. Her stomach grumbling, her thoughts focused on what the tiny office fridge might hold for lunch. She was just about to ask Hannah what she thought about a meal, when suddenly, the door to their office banged open. Startled, both women

and the dog jumped as Howard and Susan burst into the room, almost stumbling over each other. Without as much as saying hello, Susan barked out an order.

“You need to change the agenda immediately, you gotta add another item: “Dismissal of the City Administrator.” Her smaller, slightly younger companion joined in, but with an equally authoritative tone.

“Yeah, you really screwed up this time!” sneered Howard.

The unlikely couple, she was taller and much larger than her new paramour. Howard did his best to make up for his short stature with an over exaggerated swagger. They stood outside the half-gate to the office area, with large grins, obviously pleased with themselves. Their self-satisfied expressions quickly left their faces as Gracie, startled by the commotion, began snarling.

Her white fangs showing through her furling lips, head down and hair raised along her spine, she advanced toward the pair. Even though she was pleased to see the dastardly duo subdued, Claire immediately made a gesture to her dog. Gracie obediently stopped growling and sat back on her haunches, her eyes, and ears attentive to the now trembling pair of visitors. Claire released the breath she had held since the pair had entered the office. She straightened her shoulders and prepared for the onslaught.

Susan drew back and tried to hide behind her more diminutive boyfriend, failing miserably. Rising to his full height of just over five and a half feet, he inched forward to peer over the half-gate. Emboldened by the animal’s retreat, Howard regained his previous attitude. His voice rose to a higher pitch as he shook his finger at Claire.

“You are not allowed to have a dog in City Hall! I am the Commissioner of the Animal Ordinances and there are no dogs allowed in City Hall! Get that animal out of here immediately!” he said, his shrill voice rising to an even higher pitch. Behind him, Susan’s orange dyed hair shook as she nodded quickly in agreement.

“Yeah, get that dog out of here and change the agenda—NOW!”

As Claire began to voice her response, the office door opened once again. Mayor Maureen floated in with Ken by her side, her perfume filling the small space. Claire visibly relaxed. Hannah took her own seat at the desk at the front counter and blew out a sigh of relief.

“Don’t be even more ridiculous than usual Howard!” Maureen said as she opened the half-gate. Winking at Hannah, she swept past the unlikely couple to stand beside Claire. Ken, following her, shut the gate forcefully and addressed the two newest council members.

“Of course, she can have Gracie here, she is her Emotional Support Animal,” Ken declared authoritatively. “If you had actually read the animal ordinances, you would know that, Howard. Perhaps before you go around barking orders at people, you should do your homework,” Ken continued as he took his seat behind the only remaining desk. Maureen took a seat next to Hannah, who rose to start another pot of tea.

Being left in the public area, Howard and Susan exchanged a bewildered look. Howard glanced at Gracie again, and then turned and sneered.

“You still gotta change the agenda! We are going to have a vote tomorrow night and you...Ken...are going to be history!” Puffing out his chest, he half-pushed his new girlfriend out of the office and then slammed the door behind them.

Claire, felt her shoulders slump as she sunk down into her desk chair. She put her face in her hands, and silently relived the last few minutes.

“Can this day get any more difficult?” she whispered, as Gracie nudged her legs under the desk. Claire briefly smiled as Gracie put her head in her lap. Her hands found the soft fabric of the dog’s jowls and she took several calming breaths.

The Dastardly Duo

In the very earliest morning hours of the following day, the streets of Fort Evans were cold and abandoned. The fog river began its northerly creep as Susan and Howard cruised through town ever so slowly in his black Jeep Cherokee. The couple's heads swiveled from side to side of the deserted road. They craned their necks, as if to see around the buildings lining the street. Susan noisily unwrapped a chocolate bar and began stuffing pieces of it into her mouth. Sensing Howard looking at her, she gestured to the last small morsel in her hand,

“Want some?” She asked in a sticky-mouthed garble.

Howard looked at the woman's teeth now brown from the confection and stifled a shudder.

“Seriously Susan? Candy at 5 o'clock in the morning? That's just disgusting!”

Pulling the vehicle into the alley alongside the Museum, the two took their time to open their respective doors slowly and carefully. With exaggerated movements, they exited the vehicle. Susan took longer to move her sizeable bulk through the small door frame. She didn't notice the Mars Bars candy wrappers that spilled from her lap as she turned to shut the car door.

Her breath came out in clouds, chocolate-scented and much warmer than the almost freezing fall morning. Hurriedly, she caught up to Howard, who carried a large white poster board down the street.

“Good thing old Chief Ted never hooked up the cameras on Main Street like he was supposed to,” he snickered. “No one will ever know that we did this!”

Almost giddy with excitement, Susan snorted out a horse laugh at the idea.

“SSHHH!” hissed Howard, as he glanced furtively from left to right. “Someone might hear you! Let’s move it before we get caught!” he whispered.

The pair begin to slowly crouch walk, their heads rotating from one side of the vacant street to the other. Without warning, Howard abruptly halted causing Susan to stumble over him. After picking themselves up, they resume their odd crab-like shuffle down the street only to stop before the town bulletin board on the front wall of the hardware store.

Susan pulled a small hammer from her coat pocket and more Mars Bars wrappers fell to the sidewalk. Before climbing up onto the planter before the bulletin board, Howard grabbed the hammer and shoved the sign into Susan’s hands.

“Hold this!” he ordered in a low tone.

Still looking around furtively, her flame-colored coiffure glowed slightly in the early morning light. Frantically, Susan motioned Howard to hurry up.

“What are you worried about, there’s no one here except us, quit cha’ whining!”

Howard took a small nail from his flannel Carhart jacket and put the others in his mouth for safe keeping. As he hammered the first nail in the upper left corner of the sign, the sound seemed deafeningly loud in the silent, wee hours of the morning. Undeterred and elated to be in the final states of their caper, Howard began whistling a tune— ‘We’re in the Money.’

After striking the final blows on the last nail on the bottom of the sign, a commotion shattered the quiet street. Startled, thinking they have been caught red handed, the two bolted in opposite directions. In melee Howard dropped the hammer and it landed on Susan’s head. Making a beeline for his jeep, he was almost there before realizing his paramour was not behind

him. He glanced behind him and saw Susan, reeling unsteadily from the blow of the hammer, wobble precariously and before falling in a heap on the sidewalk in front of their handiwork.

Jumping into the car, he peeled away from the curb and screeched out into the silent highway. After executing an almost perfect three-point turn, he pulled the jeep to the curb where his girlfriend lay softly moaning. Howard got out and ran around the vehicle to grab Susan's abundant form. Struggling, he half carried, half drug her to the front passenger door. Using all his strength, he shoved her unceremoniously through the door frame with a rough heave. Slamming the door, all sense of secrecy was abandoned in his haste to leave the scene.

Tires squealing, he peeled out from the curb and left rubber tracks behind. A small herd of deer emerged from the brush behind the Museum. As if in a choreographed dance, the deer's heads turned together as they watched the car disappear around the corner. They silently chewed their cud as the stream of fog filled the now empty street.

‘No Comment’

After a wonderful, although chilly, early morning hike with Emma and her hound dog Sadie, Claire and Gracie arrived at work. Both Claire and Gracie were refreshed and invigorated from their tour along the two-mile route along the western ridge of Chaparral Mountain. Claire felt better after spending time outdoors with her dog. Spending time with her best friend surrounded by the majestic beauty of their rural community has refreshed her attitude and she was ready for the day.

“Good morning, Hannah! You should have seen Mount Shasta this morning, she was dressed in a white halo.”

Claire stopped her happy greeting when she noticed that Hannah was on the phone. Hannah frantically made a “shushing” motion with one hand as the other clasped the mouthpiece. The second line rung shrilly, and Hannah, not so much as asked but rather told the caller that she was putting them on hold.

“May I put you on hold please?” Without waiting for an answer, she picked up the second line and repeated the phrase, pressing the hold button before getting a response.

Both lines flashed red undeterred as Hannah motioned to Claire to enter the office inner door. Passing through the half-door, Gracie, satiated from the morning hike, made three circles before falling into her bed under Claire’s desk. She was ready to begin the workday with a nap while Claire turned to Hannah expectantly.

“What is going on? What is with the phones?”

With a puzzled expression, Claire sat down at her desk. Hannah excitedly related the story of the mysterious list of “Ken’s Krimes” which Elmer had found posted on the hardware store wall earlier this morning. As Hannah ticked off the incriminating accusations, Claire’s expression went from elation to deflated in a manner of minutes.

“And they even spelled ‘Crimes’ with a ‘K,’ can you believe that? Who is so uneducated that they would do that?”

Hannah returned to the phone and again put both callers on hold. Continuing her story, she made her boss a cup of tea and handed it to her.

“So, Elmer told Ken about it after he had taken the offensive sign down and now there is a police investigation! But word has spread like the wildfires do in this town and of course everyone and their uncle’s cousin are calling to be the first ones to get the scoop. Ken wants us to tell everyone that same thing: ‘No Comment!’” Hannah instructed Claire. “And, if that does not satisfy them, say, ‘A statement will be issued once the facts have been ascertained’ and then we get to just hang up.”

“He realizes we are going to have to explain what ascertained means, right?” Claire remarked ruefully, as she accepted the cup of tea Hannah handed her. Taking a quick sip, she turned to her phone and picked up line one.

“Here we go!”

The two young women tackled the incoming phone calls for the next hour without ceasing, as all seven hundred plus residents seemed to want to know more about the incident and more importantly, what the city was going to do about it!

Finally, when the phones returned to their normal function of an occasional interruption in their workday, Claire pushed back from her desk and stood up, stretching her arms above her head. She then swooped her arms down, bending forward before reaching out and up to a backwards curved C position. She did this three more times and then settled her shoulder blades down into place.

“Whew! That was crazy! I can only imagine what tonight’s meeting is going to be like! I better set up more chairs!”

The reprieve was short lived as Mayor Maureen and Elmer breezed into the office. Jumping up quickly, Hannah ushered them through the inner office door, while casting furtive glances at her boss.

“I just can’t believe this is happening!” Maureen exclaimed as her signature scent filled the tiny office, emanating in waves from her peach-colored scarf as she removed it. She plopped down into the small office’s only spare chair, her blue eyes flashing brightly.

“We have been on such a great positive upswing since Ken’s been the City Administrator. Why would anyone want to tarnish his reputation like this?” Maureen’s timber tones were fraught with worry and exasperation.

“Now, now, no one is going to think that Ken really embezzled 3 million dollars from the Fire House building fund,” Elmer consoled Maureen as he patted his long-time friend’s arm. The two shared a loving glance and Maureen seemed to relax.

“Let us get back to damage control on the streets, Maureen. Hannah and Claire obviously have it covered here,” the older man looked quickly at the two office ladies for confirmation. His concern was obvious, although he tried to conceal his own worries while calming Maureen.

“Yes, the phones have stopped ringing constantly and everyone has had the same information about the poster. I hate to shove you out the door, but we have a lot of work to do before tonight’s City Council meeting.” Claire grimaced as she asked her friends to leave.

After the couple withdrew from the tiny City Hall office, Hannah and Claire enjoyed the silence while they sipped their now tepid tea. As if in contemplation of all that had happened in the past few days, each of the ladies became lost in their own thoughts. The only sound in the room was the ticking of the large clock on the wall.

“Ugh!” Hannah bolted up suddenly, and taking her cup, she poured what was left in it into the miniscule sink in the tiny corner kitchen area. Twisting the knob on the hot water faucet, she rinsed away the tea leaves, and then turned back to Claire.

“I really can’t stand cold tea; it just does not have the same comforting effect as hot tea. You aren’t really going to drink that are you?” she asked her boss, eyeing her suspiciously while reaching for a fresh bag of her favorite herbal mix.

Claire looked at the bottom of her now empty cup and replied in a surprised tone.

“Yes, actually I did. But I will take another cup if you are making it. We have a lot of work ahead of us to prepare for the City Council meeting tonight and we are already behind due to this morning’s circus. I think we had better call Emma and see if she will make us some sandwiches. I am afraid it is going to be a working lunch today.”

“Good idea! Today’s marathon of calls really set us back. You want the tuna on rye, hold the tomato, right? Hopefully, she will have some of her to-die-for chocolate cake left. I’m calling her right now,” Hannah said almost visibly imagining the dark rich sponge topped with a

generous layer of delicious thick sweet chocolate frosting as she hit speed dial for Emma's coffee shop, her eyes glittered in anticipation and Claire couldn't help but laugh.

Hours later, the two women had finished adding several more pages of documentation refuting those allegations made in "Ken's Krimes". Looking up from her desk for the first time in a while, Claire surveyed the crowded office space, now papered with a littering of discarded copies and files. In addition, manilla file folders and superfluous copy paper covered both ladies' desks. Almost hidden in the melee was a lone piece of chocolate cake, as well as several half-drunk cups of tea randomly left behind during the flurry of the previous hours.

"We better clean this mess up before we call the Council Members and let them know their packets are ready. We do not need to give anyone fuel for more complaints about city employees," Claire sighed as she stood and twisted from side to side.

"No problem, I can clean this up right now," said Hannah as she grabbed the plate with the leftover cake with a smile. Alternately taking forkfuls of the rich dessert and emptying teacups, Hannah made quick work of the dishes.

"Do you want to call the Council members or should I?"

Claire thought quickly, "Lets divide and conquer. You take Howard and Susan...they like you and I will call Maureen, Tom, and Diane. Then I am going to take Gracie for a quick run around the Ball Field. The meeting is scheduled to begin in three hours, and I will be back in two. Call my cell if anymore 'emergencies' crop up please."

Nodding to Claire as she and the dog left, Hannah turned to the phone and started to press the first number, but then noticed there were still some crumbs of the chocolate confection left on her plate. Not waiting to find a fork, she picked up the delicious morsel and popped it into her

mouth. She closed her eyes and savored the bite, moaning as the sugar and chocolate hit her taste buds. Opening her eyes, she took a sip of tea and picked up the phone, the memory of the baked perfection making her smile as she punched numbers.

After a few fast jogs around the sanded dirt track at the ballfield, Claire led Gracie home to their small blue bungalow where she filled her constant companion's water and food dishes. The shepherd happily slurped and crunched as Claire made her way to the bathroom for a much needed and well-deserved shower. The run had relaxed and rejuvenated her, and now she felt more ready for the evening's meeting than she had all day.

After re-dressing in appropriate work clothes, Claire addressed Gracie.

"Okay girl, you stay home and take care of everything, I will be back once the meeting is over," The gold and tan canine was already comfortably stretched out on her bed in front of the fireplace. Her head perched on her elegantly crossed front paws, the dog was the picture of canine contentment.

"Don't wait up!" she added and then laughed as the dog yawned and closed her eyes.

Walking back into the now clean office, Claire immediately noticed that there were still two unclaimed board binders. With a puzzled expression on her face, she turned to Hannah.

"Susan and Howard have not picked theirs up yet? That is odd, normally they are the ones calling us days in advance wanting to know where their copies are. The meeting is going to start soon."

"I know, it is so strange, I called both their house numbers and their cell phones. I even called the Post Office to see if they might be hanging around there, but no one has seen them

since yesterday morning,” Hannah said as she took her coat from the back of her desk chair. “Is it alright if I leave now? I’m supposed to babysit my little cousins tonight.”

“They were so excited about their plans yesterday; I imagine they will be here soon. Thank you so much for all your help today, it has definitely been a long one, and you didn’t get a lunch break. Have a nice evening and have fun with your family,” Claire said as she sat down at her desk. She turned to her computer and checked her email.

“I plan on it! I found a book on local history that is very interesting, and I can’t wait to share it with my cousins. It has some old hand-drawn maps of the old gold mines down Eastside Road. There is supposed to be a big one on the same parcel as the first well ever dug by the Town of Fort Evans,” Hannah announced excitedly.

“We should take a hike out there one of these days. We could find some gold!”

As the younger woman gathered her things and waved good-bye, Claire could not help but think how grateful she was to have found such a wonderful co-worker. Luckily, nothing, not even the drama of things like the “Ken’s Krimes” caper phased her exuberance.

The City Council Meeting

Claire made her way upstairs to the Community Hall where Dean had set up the tables and chairs for the City Council Meeting. Though the meeting was not set to start for another 45 minutes, it was her routine to make sure that all name plates were in place, the mayor's gavel was set at right angles to her chair and there were plenty of agendas for those who chose to attend the meeting. She had made extra copies in anticipation of a larger than normal crowd.

Placing Howard's and Susan's binders on the table reserved for Council Members at the front of the room, she was startled when Susan loudly burst into the room frantically yelling.

"Where's Howard? Have you seen my boyfriend? I cannot find him anywhere!"

Stepping back from the larger, obviously distraught woman, Claire answered.

"No, I have not. But here is your board binder," as she offered the heavy three-ring binder, extending it to Susan.

"I don't want that, you stupid twit! I want to know where Howard is!" Susan said as she slapped the book from Claire's hand. A waterfall of white pages cascaded to the hard wood floor, as she spun away from Claire. Pins from her unnaturally orange hair flew out as she whirled around. The floor shook as she strode out of the room and the quiet hall echoed with her bellowing cries.

"Howard! HOWARD!" Her voice rose to an amazing pitch as she stomped through the halls of the city building. The wooden window casements shook and caused windows to rattle, as her footsteps faded down the passageway.

Claire, though startled by the older woman's actions, nonetheless crouched down, and gathered the pages. She began organizing the pages back into the binder which she and Hannah has so painstakingly assembled only hours before, when she caught a whiff of Maureen's signature perfume.

"My sweet Lordy Bee, what has gotten into her?" rang out the familiar melodic voice of the mayor. Maureen entered the room and saw Claire hastily picking up the mess. She quickly knelt to assist.

"What is she yelling about now?" Maureen asked Claire with a concerned look.

"I really don't know, she was asking about Howard," Claire answered while picking up the last of the scattered pages.

"I thought the two of them were joined at the hip. What is even weirder is they didn't pick up their meeting materials when Hannah called them earlier."

Their conversation was cut short when the other council members started arriving. Townspeople joined them, chattering excitedly. The volume in the former auditorium rose to an uncomfortable level, the chatter echoing the in large auditorium.

Not wanting to risk a conversation with anyone, Claire avoided making eye contact with anyone as she sat down in her appointed seat, Claire could pick out the words, "Ken's Crimes" in several of the conversations. She sighed with relief when Ken himself entered the room and took his seat next to hers. Ted, the Police Chief and his counterpart for the Fire Department, Frank, joined them at the city staff table. The two young men shaking people's hands as they sat down and opened their own meeting folders.

“Where are Susan and Howard?” Ken whispered to Claire as she fired up her laptop.

“Susan was here, but she obviously lost Howard somewhere and she went off to find him. “She was really upset,” she murmured back, sensing a hush fall over the room as the meeting was about to begin. Mayor Maureen was very punctual and did not let anything from preventing the city council meetings to begin on time.

As the assembled group stood to say the Pledge of Allegiance, Susan reentered the room in a panic.

“He is DEAD!” Susan, screaming hysterically, startled the gathering and ending the pledge.

“He is dead! My poor Howard is dead!” Susan turned in a large circle before dramatically falling into a heap at the foot of the City Council table. Stunned onlookers took their seats as if this happened at every City Council meeting.

“Oh, I wish I had some popcorn!” said Phoebe Blacksmith to her friend Shirley Spallino. The two women giggled with their heads together.

“This is way better than any reality TV show,” Shirley agreed.

Startled into action, Frank jumped over the city staff table and in a few short bounds made it to Susan’s prostate side. Everyone again stood up and began talking loudly, crowding around the now prone figure splayed dramatically at the mayor’s feet.

“Get back, get back, give her some room to breathe,” ordered Frank.

As he turned away from the unconscious woman, and raised his hands motioning the crowd back, Claire thought she saw Susan's eyes open briefly and then, just as quickly, close again.

"All right, show's over, everybody out," commanded the Ted. "We need to vacate the premises. Claire, call 911! There will not be a City Council meeting tonight!"

Respecting his uniform, or the pistol in its holster at his side, the crowd heeded the Police Chief's orders and filed out of the building. Excited chatter echoes in the foyer as they took their turns leaving the hall. Phoebe and Shirley were the last of the townsfolk to leave the building. Their eyes taking in everything, as they slowly followed the rest of the crowd.

Passing smelling salt under Susan's bulbous red nose, Frank cradled her head in his muscular arm.

"What, what is going on?" Susan raised herself up on one dimpled elbow and stared at the people kneeling around her. Regaining her former indignation, she lashed out.

"Get that away from me, I can't breathe!" she said as she shoved Frank's hand away from her face.

"Susan, are you hurt? Can you move? Do you remember anything from before your fall?" Frank questioned her confidently and quietly as he peered into her pupils looking for signs of a concussion.

"I, uh, I, uh, oh my God, he's DEAD!" Susan resumed her wailing and swinging her arm out in front of her, struck Frank full in the face.

Reeling from the unexpected blow, Frank fell back and rolled away clutching his nose. Arriving just at that moment, the EMS team took over, checking Susan's vital signs and then hoisted her up onto a lowered stretcher. Holding his nose, the Fire Chief stepped away to let the medical professionals take over. All three were needed to hoist the large lady into the stretcher and then raise it to its normal height. As they began wheeling their charge to the front door, she suddenly, and almost miraculously, regained enough breath to start screeching.

“I saw him, I saw him...he's in the basement!” cried the hysterical woman as she was wheeled outside to the waiting ambulance.

The Plot Thickens

Those remaining in the council chambers began talking in loud voices at the same time, creating a chaotic hullabaloo as it blended with the sirens from the now departing ambulance. Without anyone noticing, Ted pulled Claire out into the hallway.

“Where’s the key to the basement?” Ted demanded.

“It is in my office,” she said quickly, “but wait a minute, how—Susan doesn’t have a key, how did she get in the basement?” Claire said as she started for the office. “It doesn’t make any sense!”

“That doesn’t matter now, just get the key. If there is a body in the basement, we need to act quickly! We do not know what she saw until we investigate,” Ted said as the pair raced down through the double doors and down the four stairs to the office door.

Frank, Ken, the mayor, and the rest of the City Council seeing Ted and Claire leave, followed on their heels. Once Claire unlocked the door, she and Ted went straight to the key box. The excited group pushed their way into the very crowded office as she thumbed through the key rack until she found what she was looking for. “Here’s the key!” Claire offered the small silver metal device to Ted, her hands shaking; the reality of the situation sinking in.

“Everyone stay here!” ordered the Police Chief. Unholstering his gun and his flashlight, he called for the wounded Fire Chief to follow him. “This is a possible crime scene. Frank, you’re my back up until the rest of the Fort Evans Police Department gets here!”

Nodding his assent, the two men quickly made their way outside to the basement entrance. Several heads crowded the window above Claire’s desk as they watched the uniformed

officers open the door. All were silent and Claire could hear the old wooden steps creak as they began their descent into the bowels of the century-old building.

The crowd in Claire's office let out a collective sigh as the two uniformed men disappeared through the basement door. The only sound was the old clock ticking away the minutes. Looking around at the assembled group, she had what, at the time, seemed like an absurd thought.

"I think someone needs to leave," she started to say as five pairs of eyes turned to look at her. "I mean, uh, er., well, right now there's a quorum of City Council people here and that's against Roberts Rules of Order."

Even though a murder may or may not have taken place, Claire took her City Clerk duties seriously. Heads turned to look at each other, and people started immediately arguing.

"Not me!"

"You go!"

"No, YOU leave!"

Raising both his hands, the City Administrator called for order. "Claire is right," Ken agreed. "Someone needs to leave this office..." his voice trailed off as he realized how ridiculous his statement seemed at a time like this. As if sensing his indecision, the squabbling grew louder.

Putting her right thumb and index finger together, Maureen lifted them to her mouth and produced an ear-splitting whistle. Her action had the desired effect and everyone stopped talking and turned their attention to her.

"Claire has a point. And Ken is correct." Maureen announced.

“As mayor, I will go upstairs and deal with the public. Please let me know as soon as Ted and Frank come back. I want to know what they find as soon as they find it!”

She had not taken two steps toward the stairs before lights darting from the public safety duo’s flashlights were seen coming out of the basement. All eyes focused on the pair as they reentered the office.

“There’s no one down there,” reported Ted as he holstered his gun and flashlight. “Alive or dead. I need to get to the hospital and ask Susan a lot of questions. Please, everyone just go home now. If you hear or think of anything that might be helpful, call the P.D. office.”

Ted left the office quickly. Blue and red lights flashed as the police cruiser left the parking lot, siren blaring, fading in the distance as it jettied toward Forest Mountain.

Everyone again started talking at once and the noise level in the small office swelled quickly and sharply until Maureen repeated her sharp whistle.

“You heard the man, it is time to go folks, show is over. Hopefully, we will get some answers tomorrow,” Ken announced gesturing to the door as he ushered everyone out except for Claire and Frank.

Body, Body, Whose Got the Body?

Once they were alone in the small dark office, Claire looked at Frank. She saw how handsome the man that been her schoolyard friend had become. Yes, she imagined a future with him, but at the same time, she couldn't get past all that had happened in just the last few days, let alone the previous years. She met his eyes and asked in a tremulous voice.

“There seriously wasn't anyone down there? What could Susan have seen? And more importantly, where is Howard?”

Frank stroked his chin hairs, as if pondering her questions deeply before answering.

“Well, you know what a dank mess that basement is. There seemed to be less cobwebs, and there may have been some disturbance to the top layer of dirt on the floor, but it is so hard to see anything I do not know how we could tell if there had been a body there tonight or not.”

A shiver seemed to run down his spine as his shoulders shook almost uncontrollably. He wanted to reach out to Claire and hug her in close. He had loved her since the second grade. When her parents tragically died on Forest Mountain, he had been on scene as an EMT. Even though he had done his work dispassionately, all he could think about at the time was Claire. Now, he just wanted to save her from another harrowing experience which could send her back from the amazing strides she had made since her parent's death.

“We can't just stand here. We gotta do something,” Frank exclaimed. “Ted is at the hospital, and who knows when he will get some answers out of Susan.” He briefly touched his red, swollen nose and grimaced.

“I’ve got an idea, why don’t we just go to Howard’s house?” Claire suggested tentatively. “Take a look around and see if we can’t find him or something that might lead us to him. Maybe he forgot about the meeting and is just sitting at home drinking his weeknight six-pack.”

“That’s a great idea. Maybe Susan was just hysterical or hallucinating...or both. What are we waiting for? Let’s roll!” agreed Frank excitedly as he grabbed his coat.

“Wouldn’t that be great! Okay, let’s do it. I’ve got to lock up first,” Claire said as she secured the back door.

“I will meet you out front in a hot minute.”

Frank left in a rush and Claire locked the office door behind him. She went up the four steps to the auditorium and bolted the front doors. Then, as she went through the dark building, her footsteps echoing behind her, she made her way down the now dark hallway to the kitchen. Tensing suddenly, she thought she heard the back door shut. She could feel her heart jump in her chest. Had someone still been in the building? Was it Howard?

She silently tiptoed toward the kitchen door and then crept across the floor to look out the window. In the dim shadows from the streetlight, she saw a small dark figure in a hooded jacket dart around the corner of the back entry way! Panicking, she ran back down the hall to the front doors and yelled for Frank.

“Come quick, there’s someone here!” she shouted as she raced down the concrete steps to the parking lot.

“He went that way!” she pointed to the back alley leading away from City Hall. “Hurry!” Suddenly shivering in the cold night air, she wished Gracie were by her side. At the same time, she realized something about the small dark hooded figure that seemed familiar.

“Stay here!” Frank, ordered as he followed the direction of her outstretched arm and he bounded around the building. Claire stood shaking as she waited, now more from fear than the cold. It was so quiet! One minute, two...Frank returned almost as quickly as he had left.

Breathing hard, he bent over and rested his hands on his knees as he caught his breath.

“I did not see anyone. Whoever it was, they are gone now.” He straightened and asked, “Are you okay? Did you recognize whoever it was?”

Seeing her shivers, he put an arm around her shoulders. Frank felt her tense briefly before she relaxed into his warmth. Their eyes locked before she pulled away and took a step back from the handsome Fire Chief.

“No, it all happened so quickly. I am fine. But I would feel better, though, if we could get Gracie before we go to Howard’s house if that is okay with you. So many strange things have happened tonight, I know I will be all right once she is by my side. No one can sneak up on us with her nose on guard.”

Frank drove them the short distance to Claire’s house in his shiny red Chief’s truck. They picked up the shepherd, who seemed to understand the importance of the situation as she rode calmly in the back seat. Frank and Claire scanned their respective sides of the street as they maneuvered the dark roadways across town to Howard’s house.

The silence between them during the short star-lit drive was heavy with emotions. When Frank turned down one street, his gaze faced away from her, Claire stole looks at his profile. She admired his straight nose, full lips, and chiseled chin. So much like that 8-year-old boy in the Fort Evans Elementary schoolyard, but also so not.

When his head swung back to the front of the windshield, Claire automatically turned to look out the right side of the vehicle. While she scanned the road, Frank had the chance to look at the love of his life without anyone noticing. He loved her curly blonde hair and the soft angle of her shoulder. Starting to reach out a hand to touch hers, he realized it was time to head down the long dirt road to Howard's house.

"I never realized how spooky this driveway was until tonight. All these bushes and trees make it even darker than usual. It's really creepy," Claire commented as Frank navigated the pothole-filled unpaved road.

Frank turned his attention from the road to his friend. Claire was tensed in her seat, leaning forward, her hands clenched on the dashboard. Her hair was mussed and he could see her jaw clenching and unclenching. He regretted the decision to take this adventure.

"For some reason I just got the heeby jeebies," She shivered in the passenger seat and Gracie came to stand at her shoulder as they pulled up to the house.

"Looks like his Jeep is gone," observed Frank as he looked at the dark house. "All the lights are off, and there's no smoke coming from the chimney. I am going to get out and look around a bit. Are you going to be okay here in the truck?"

‘I don’t know Frank; this is creeping me out. Ted was right, we should just go home and wait to hear what Susan has to say...’ Frowning, she stopped speaking abruptly when she heard the low growl emanating from deep in Gracie’s throat.

“What is wrong, girl?” Claire and Frank watched as the hackles rose along the shepherds’ spine. Crouching low, the dog alerted to something in the bushes near the driver’s side of the truck. Their eyes following the dog’s long snout, the pair stared into the dense evergreen brush to the left of the truck.

“Oh my gosh! What is that?” Claire exclaimed.

Wait, What?

Claire pointed a shaking finger toward the edge of the circle of light coming from the beams of Frank's headlights. Even in the darkness of the dense brush, Frank could not mistake the shape lying half-concealed by the foliage. It was a body and from what he could see, it appeared to be man of shorter stature. Claire buried her face in Gracie's soft warm ruff and put her arms around the dog's shoulders. Frank put a hand on Claire's shoulder as he quickly grabbed his phone and hit speed dial for the police department.

"Ted, pick up your gosh darn phone! Somebody is hurt bad, or—or..." Frank caught Claire's gaze. A knowing glance passed between them. Frank did not need to pretend; they both knew it was a bad situation. He had called the police chief, not the ambulance, and Claire was smart enough to know what that meant.

"I am pretty sure he is dead," Frank spoke into the phone. "Just call me when you get this."

Almost before he put the phone down, its shrill ring broke the silence. It was Joey, the deputy police officer. Frank quickly related the situation, listened for a moment, and then ordered, "Hurry" before ending the call.

"We are sitting tight until back up gets here," Frank explained. "And when Joey arrives, *you* stay in this truck." He looked at Claire to make certain she had understood him.

"You don't have to worry about that!" she said. "I have no problem staying right here with Gracie. But shouldn't we call the hospital or the Mayor or Ken or somebody?"

Before Frank could answer, both were startled by the scream of sirens and flashing lights splitting the night sky. Frank opened the driver's side door and exited the vehicle to wave down the police cruiser. Gracie immediately sprang over the divider into the seat with Claire as Frank quickly opened the door and left before shutting it tightly behind him.

The police cruiser parked directly behind the Chief's truck, and the officer immediately exited the vehicle and Frank half-ran to meet him. He had silenced the sirens, but blue and red flashing lights cast eerie shadows into the dense forest surrounding the house. In the silence and in the strobe effect lighting, Claire could see Frank pointing to bushes where they had seen the body.

Joey illuminated the area with his flashlight and Claire turned away when she again saw the legs sprawled carelessly protruding from the foliage. He and Frank walked carefully towards the area, scanning the bushes on either side as they approached the body. In the flashing lights, Claire watched as the men's breath made clouds of warm moisture in the cool night air.

Before they had time to walk to the body, another siren added to the commotion and more blue and red lights joined the merry go round of flashes alternately changing the scene from cyan to scarlet every few seconds. Pulling his cruiser in next to his co-workers, Ted joined Frank and Joey as they advanced cautiously to the body. Even in the multi-colored setting, Claire saw Frank's face visibly blanch as they took in the scene. He turned back to the truck where Claire and Gracie waited, and gave a solemn nod, confirming their suspicions.

Claire gasped as the realization dawned. Howard was dead.

It just did not make sense. Yes, he and Susan were not the nicest people in the world, and it was very true that he had instigated a lot of arguments that took away from the town's

progress, but dead? It just did not seem possible! Remembering her duties as City Clerk, she made a mental list of all the things that would need to be done. First, she would have to report a dead council member to the state authorities, and then there would be a special election to arrange to fill the vacant council seat.

“Oh Gracie, I am a horrible person!” She hugged the dog closer to her as they sat together on the passenger seat of the truck. “Here poor Howard is dead and all I’m thinking about who is going to replace him on the Council!”

Her thoughts were interrupted by the cold air swirling into the truck as Frank re-entered.

“Are you all, right? I need to get you and Gracie home. The medical examiner from Redding is on his way up. It is an hour and half drive in the daylight, so we do not expect him here until after midnight. Will you be all right alone, do you want me to call Emma to be with you?”

“Wait, tell me first! Is it really Howard? And he is dead? How did he die? Tell me everything!” demanded Claire.

Frank eased the truck around the other emergency vehicles and headed away from the house. Claire sensed his reluctance to share what he had learned.

“We need to call Maureen. I will be fine, but first I need to know what happened, so that I can accurately alert Ken and the council to the situation,” she said trying to impress upon him the need to fill her in on the details.

“We won’t know the cause of death until after the Medical Examiner does his thing. But yes, it was Howard, and he is very much dead. All I could see without moving the body was that

his head was very badly bruised and bloody. He was also covered in a lot of dirt, like he had been dragged to his final resting place,” Frank looked at his close friend with concern. “Are you sure you want to know all of this?”

“Yes, I need to know. Was Ted able to talk to Susan at the hospital? Because it doesn’t add up, Susan said she saw his dead body in the basement, but then just a half hour later, we find him at his house? Did Ted say anything about his interview with her?” Claire’s eyes bored into him as the questions spilled from her lips.

“Ted went to see Susan at the hospital, but when he got there she was sedated to the point where she couldn’t answer any questions. He was at the top of Forest Mountain on his way back from the hospital when I called him, so he did not get the message until he got to cell service again,” Frank explained as he pulled into Claire’s carport.

“Hang tight, I’m going to make sure your house is secure, and I will be back for you in a minute,” Frank informed her as he left the truck.

She saw him pull his revolver as he punched in the code on the front door lock. She followed his progress through the house as lights switched on in every room. Returning, he opened the passenger side door, and she slid out into the cold night. Gracie ran ahead into the house as if to double-check Frank’s work. He followed Claire inside and then made her promise to lock all the doors and windows.

“Don’t worry, I will be fine, I have Gracie and I have you on speed dial. Please let me know as soon as you do if there are any new developments,” Claire said as she followed him to the front door.

After his truck left her driveway, she locked the door and turning to Gracie who was again on her dog bed in front of the fireplace, she murmured, “There’s something very fishy going on, Gracie, and it starts with a capital S!”

You Heard it Here First!

Opening the door to the City Hall office, Hannah felt immense relief to see her boss at her desk. Rushing in, she pulled off her coat and hung it over the back of her chair. Noticing that Claire didn't have a cup of tea, she quickly made one for each of them. She didn't like the look on her friend's face, so after serving them both the hot beverages, she quietly said good morning.

“Are you okay! I heard about last night; the news is all over town! I just can't believe that Howard is dead! Did you and Frank really find his body?”

Hannah's look of concern and worry made Claire felt sorry for her younger friend. Blowing on the tea to cool her first sip, she made a tremulous smile. She took a deep breath and reassured not just Hannah, but also herself.

“I am okay, really. Yes, Frank and I had the great idea to look for Howard, which didn't seem so great after we actually found him. Frank was wonderful, he handled the situation so well. When Ted and Joey got there, they were calm and professional, and that really helped the whole situation. And of course I had Gracie right by my side,” Claire explained. “There's a lot to tell and even more to figure out!”

Claire sipped her cup of Earl Grey while Hannah put the phones on auto answer. Claire related the events of the previous evening, ticking each event off on her fingers. She watched the wattage on Hannah's smile wane from her usual 100 voltage to a that of a dim-lighting bulb. She had just started to voice her questions about Susan when a familiar floral scent preceded Mayor Maureen into the small office.

“I can't believe you two are here,” gushed Maureen as she swept into the room followed by a cloud of her signature Shalimar. “I thought you would take a bereavement day or

something. I think I can grant you that as Mayor...,” the melodic features of her regular speech left her as she pondered the thought. She took her usual seat in the chair across from Claire’s desk. “Are you sure you are alright to be here today, after all, you did find the body!”

“We have to be here,” explained Claire, “You know in this small town everyone is going to have an idea about what happened to Howard. The phone lines have been ringing all morning with people offering ‘help’ for the investigation,” she said gesturing to the red lights flashing on both her and Hannah’s phones.

The younger woman nodded her head and explained to the mayor who was now making her own cup of tea, “we’ve got the ‘No Comment’ recording playing on both lines. I just sure hope Ken gets here soon; people are not going to be satisfied with that answer today!”

The words were not out of her mouth for two seconds before Claire’s cell phone’s shrill report startled them all. The three women jumped simultaneously and then looked at each other as if mentally playing rock-paper-scissors to see who would answer the call. Looking at the caller identification screen, Claire breathed “Oh good, it’s Frank!” As she swiped to answer, she announced, “I’m putting you on speaker, Hannah and Maureen are here with me.”

“That’s fine. Kens not there yet? I have tried reaching him on his cell phone, but no luck. Have any of you seen or heard from him yet? Ted hasn’t been able to reach him this morning either, and I am getting concerned” queried the Fire Chief. The trio of women shook their heads in unison and then murmured their negative responses.

“Okay, I am glad you are all together, so I can give you the facts at the same time. Here is what I know so far. Howard is dead, Susan is still in the hospital and Ted asked me to let you know the official comment is that there is an on-going homicide investigation at this time, and

we are unable to provide any comment. Anyone with any information regarding the case should contact the Fort Evans Police Department immediately,” Frank instructed.

“Well, that’s a little better answer, at least people will know that they can call the police department instead of City Hall,” Maureen said. Hannah and Claire nodded eagerly in agreement. “I will change the message now, and we can keep the phones on mute,” announced Claire. “If anyone really needs us, they can call our cell phones like Frank did.”

Frank ended the call saying he would stay in contact and let them know if there were any new developments. “Please have Ken call me when he arrives in the office, if he has any problem with our plan, then he can take it up with the Police Chief.”

Maureen nodded in assent, “You know that people are going to start showing up here soon, so I will handle the foot traffic. It is amazing how many of our seven hundred citizens feel the need to get the latest gossip straight from City Hall! But it is an election year and looking at the bright side, this is great opportunity for face time for me.”

The first such townspeople, Phoebe Blacksmith, marched through the door and immediately started peppering the mayor with questions. “Is Howard dead? I heard that Susan killed him and then tried to kill herself and now she is in the hospital. How and where did she do it?, I want answers and I want them now!” Phoebe’s generous, red-painted lips curved into a salacious grin as she eagerly awaited the gory details. She couldn’t wait to be the first to provide the talk of the town to all her friends over their usual morning soiree at the Emma’s coffee shop.

Putting her arm around the smaller, rounder lady, Maureen ushered Phoebe out of the office, turning back to grimace at Claire and Hannah as she motioned them to lock the door behind her. Before Claire could drive the bolt through the old-fashioned door lock, Ken walked

through, his arms full of delicious smelling packages and a bottle of something that looked suspiciously like wine.

“You might as well hang the “CLOSED sign,” the older man boomed as he set the bags of sandwiches and condiments on the back counter of the office. As if he knew food was being served, Frank followed on his heels, locking the door behind them. Immediately the Fire Chief headed toward the inviting aroma. “What is for lunch? I am starving! Fending off citizen’s questions and half-baked conspiracy theories is exhausting!” his mouth almost visibly watering. “Is that wine? Are we celebrating?” His question echoed everyone else’s thoughts as they all turned to face the City Administrator.

“Well, you could say that” said Ken. “But not to anyone outside this room!”

A Case of Mistaken Identity

“You are going to have to save the fermented grape juice ‘til later.” Four pairs of eyes turned to Ted as he strolled into the office. “Ken, I hate to do this to you, but you are under arrest for the murder of Howard Handover.” A collective gasp rose from the quartet as Ken stood up and faced the Police Chief. Frank dropped the sandwich he had been holding, but not before taking a large bite.

“What’s the meaning of this Ted?” Ken’s eyes narrowing as he studied the uniformed officer. “How can you possibly think I had anything to do with Howard’s untimely demise?” the older man took a step away from his desk. “I was at the City Council meeting when Susan supposedly found his body in the basement, if that isn’t an airtight alibi, then I don’t know what is. There were at least 20 people in the room.”

“He is right, he was there in the room with us the whole time,” concurred Claire.

“This is a homicide investigation, all I can tell you at this point is the D.A. believes there is enough evidence to back up this arrest,” said Ted. “Come on Ken, let’s go.”

Ken stood up from his desk, nodded to his friends and colleagues and walked through the half door to the officer. Everyone else in the office also stood up. Faces turned to one another and eyes searched expressions as if each were silently asking each other to somehow stop the scene playing out before them.

“Do we really have to do the handcuff routine?” he asked, half-joking.

“I am afraid so, it is standard procedure, same as reading you your rights. You have the right to remain silent...”

Ted's voice drifted off as he placed the metal bracelets on the City Administrator's wrists and the two left the office area. All eyes were on the two men, several welling with tears.

Claire realized with her boss temporarily out of the office, she was now in charge of the administration of the city. She swallowed hard as she looked around the room to her colleagues. Gracie, if sensing her distress, nuzzled her soft damp nose into her beloved human's hand.

Claire sank back down into her chair and the dog buried her head in lap. Everyone else took their seats as well with a defeated air as they watched the police chief and the city administrator exit the room. Before he was all the way through the doorway, Ken turned back and addressed Claire.

"As City Clerk, you are now in charge. Don't worry, I will be in touch as soon as I clear up this mess. Do me a favor and call the City Attorney's office and fill Gloria in on the latest happenings," Ken smiled warmly and nodded his head to everyone in the room.

"I will be back before you can say 'Toot Sweet'!"

Dead silence enveloped the office as Frank, Hannah and Claire sat speechless, all energy suspended from the office. Their heads snapped up as the door swung open and the familiar scent of Shalimar softly entered. Mayor Maureen entered and seeing their faces exclaimed, "What, did someone else die?"

"Something like that," Claire answered looking around at the faces of her friends and colleagues. "Ken has been charged with Harold's death. Ted was just here and took him away in handcuffs".

“Wait, what?” Maureen whispered as she sank into the one spare office chair that Frank hastily vacated as he saw her expression. Claire and Frank filled her in on the latest happenings, while Hannah hopped up from her desk and busied herself in the kitchen. She sliced the sandwiches into easily hand-held sized pieces. She also opened the bottle of wine and discreetly poured it into the office tea mugs. Quietly she moved around the office serving Claire, Maureen, and Frank. Only Gracie noted any interest in her machinations, her elegant black nose twitching to the enticing aromas of turkey, salami, and ham.

With Maureen’s gaze firmly fixed upon her face, Claire absentmindedly picked up the newly delivered mug and took a swallow. Her eyes watering, her dripping gaze sought Hannah. Hannah smiled, picked up her mug in a salute to her boss and lifting the cup to her lips, took a long drink.

Frank, noticing the sandwich to the left of his elbow, the one already half eaten, smiled, and picking up the meal, took a large bite and sighed. Maureen, hearing his obvious relish at the Emma’s daily deli specialty, remembered that she hadn’t eaten since much earlier that day. The office grew quiet except for the contented sounds of people enjoying a good meal.

After several minutes, and a few refills from the large bottle of wine, the quartet were revived from their libations. Hannah again moved around the small space, emptying discards and paper plates into the office’s one trash can. Silently tipping the last of the wine evenly into the tea mugs, she slipped Gracie a few of the sandwich remnants.

Glancing at the clock above the front desk, Claire was surprised to see that the workday had ended an hour before. She wasn’t surprised then when Gloria, the City’s janitor swept into

the office. Wearing her usual black jeans and sweatshirt, Gloria was startled when she realized the office was full of people, including the mayor.

“I, I, I can come back later,” Gloria stammered. A recluse, Gloria enjoyed her work in the large, dark building where she could work alone after hours. Always dressed in black, the older woman was diminutive as she was extremely quiet. As she started backing out of the room, Frank picked up the overflowing trash can and announced he would take it out to the dumpster, saving Gloria the trip.

“I need to be going too,” said Maureen. Claire and Hannah agreed that everything could wait until the morning and they also exited the building. Everyone wished Gloria a good night and she acknowledged them with a lowered head and a nod as they left her alone.

The trio of women met Frank in the parking lot. Claire noticed that Frank seemed a little nonplussed. As Maureen and Hannah climbed into their vehicles, Claire followed Frank to his Fire Chief’s truck. Both waved as the other women turned onto the highway on their way home.

“What’s on your mind, I mean besides the obvious,” Claire asked. “Did you get a sudden brainstorm? Or was there a clue in the dumpster?”

Her eyes sought his as they stood alone in the deepening evening shadow. The fading sunlight caused the changing leaves to cast an amber glow over the lawns surrounding City Hall. Frank lowered his gaze to Claire’s searching look. She felt something stir in her core. Without waiting he wrapped his arms around her and tightened his grasp until she was leaning against him totally. Claire relaxed momentarily, almost forgetting everything that happened.

“Wait a minute! I know you found something, what is it?” Claire asked in an accusing tone as she pulled back to look up at the tall handsome fire chief.

Frank didn't answer. Keeping one arm around his dearest friend, he reached into the pocket of his blue uniform jacket. He pulled out what looked like a piece of trash and held it in front of Claire's eyes. Before Claire could even recognize what Frank was holding, a low growl rose in Gracie's throat.

The Candy Man Can

Claire reached down and smoothed Gracie's ruff and looked in same direction as the dog. A cat was crossing the parking lot. Gracie hated cats; it was her one vice. Turning her attention back to Frank, she gasped.

"A Mars Bars wrapper? I only know of one person who always has that particular brand of candy!" Claire looked at Frank and asked in a low tone, "Where did you find this?"

"While you were finishing up in the office, I took the trash to the dumpster. I saw the basement door, and I remembered something that I saw last night. I still had a copy of the basement key, so I went down to check it out. That's when I found this!"

"Susan! She was down there last night, but why on earth would she be eating candy bars when she supposedly saw Harold's dead body?" Claire pondered.

"Who knows? Maybe she is a stress eater?"

Frank's grin made Claire giggle, which she immediately felt badly about.

"You have to put it back, it's evidence!" Claire exclaimed..

"No, it's okay, this isn't the only one. There are a couple more down there," he said.

Claire noticed that dusk had fallen, and the shadows beneath the trees and around the bushes surrounding City Hall's parking lot were deepening. She didn't want to argue with Frank, but she also wanted to get indoors quickly.

Frank read her body language and knew she was conflicted about his latest discovery. He thought about what they could do with their 'clue' and how it might help exonerate Ken. As a

peace officer, he knew that he should report the finding and their suspicions to the Police Chief as soon as possible. But first, he needed to get Claire home.

“Let’s go somewhere more private and go over what we know. If we could find Howard’s body, then I think we can find his killer. Agreed?” Frank queried.

“Agreed! I need to get Gracie home and give her dinner. I’m not really hungry after all the sandwiches and excitement, but if you are. I have some of Emma’s Award-Winning Banana Bread...”

“Sold! Let’s go!”

The trio, two humans and one canine walked the short distance to Claire’s house. True to her word, she filled Gracie’s dish with kibbles and changed the water in her bowl. Once the dog was happily munching, she returned to the kitchen. Frank sat at the breakfast bar in the kitchen. Claire drew the delectable treat from the bread box and got two plates. Having smelled the delicious baked goods, she decided she was hungry after all.

The crisis at hand was forgotten as they devoured the sweet bread, complete with walnuts and raisins. Frank finished first and then made big eyes at the remains of the loaf on the cutting board. Claire saw his expression and laughing, cut him another piece. While he enjoyed his extra slice, Claire got a notebook and a pen.

“Okay, what do we know? Howard and Susan had it out for Ken and were poised to, along with Diane, terminate his position as City Administrator,” she said.

“That looks bad for Ken. It gives him a motive to get rid of Howard,” Frank pointed out.

“True, but Ken was in the Council chambers when Susan was in the basement. She is the only one who said she saw Howard’s body in the basement, why would she say that if he wasn’t? If, and I am just putting this out there as a hypothetical, Ken killed Howard sometime before the meeting, how did Susan know that Howard would be in the basement?” Claire shook her head.

“We agree that it was most likely Susan and Howard that hung the ‘Ken’s Krimes’ sign on the Hardware Store. That looks bad for Ken too, unfortunately,” Frank added ruefully.

“Ted said that there was enough evidence to arrest Ken. All of this seems very circumstantial. I think we need to do some sleuth work. What are you doing tomorrow morning?” Frank inquired.

“I need to walk Gracie. Meet me at Emma’s at 8?” she said.

“It is a deal. Someone somewhere had to see something that would help us clear Ken. I think we should take a closer look at all the sites: the Hardware Store, the Basement, Howard’s house, and the City Hall Grounds.”

He took his plate to the kitchen sink and laid it down. He looked out the window which faced the main street of town. He grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair and turned to Claire. Before she could turn away, he gave her a quick kiss on the lips and then tweaked her nose, smiling down at her sudden surprise.

“See you in the morning!”

She walked him to the door, closely followed by Gracie. As he crossed the street, he turned and waved. He made a gesture indicating she should lock her doors. She waved back and shut the door, dutifully locking it behind her.

All Hands on Deck

While Frank and Claire enjoyed their banana bread and made plans, Maureen and Elmer were sharing a cup of coffee at the local diner. Sitting in a booth in the farthest corner of the small restaurant, the two were having a similar conversation as their younger colleagues. Maureen had jotted notes on a napkin, but half of the writing had been crossed out.

“Okay, so that leaves us with Ken is guilty,” Maureen sighed, after reviewing the list for the umpteenth time. “We are missing something. Someone else had to have killed Howard. But who and why? We have to figure it out! This town cannot have our City Administrator on trial for murder! What would all of the other mayors say?”

“I think Susan knows more than she is saying. She was, after all, his girlfriend. I think we need to do some digging,” Elmer suggested.

“We know Ted isn’t going to give us any information, but what is stopping us from talking to Susan? I could make a nice bouquet and a casserole and take them over to her house. Every woman loves flowers and we know she loves food. I will be her best friend and maybe she will confide in me!” Maureen spoke quickly, getting excited about her plan.

“Great idea! I am meeting with her at the Cemetery tomorrow to pick out Howard’s plot. Maybe I can get her to slip up on the details,” Elmer said.

“Okay, but don’t get too close to her! Howard hadn’t been her crush very long and look what happened to him!” Maureen chuckled, knowing full well that Elmer would never do such a thing. She reached across the table and gave his hand a squeeze as she teased him.

The middle-aged couple clinked their coffee cups together and saluted each other before taking their final sips. Elmer called for the check and Maureen stuffed the napkin with all their notes into her purse. She stood up and he, ever the gentleman, helped her with her coat. Maureen loved Elmer and their long-term relationship was one that was comfortable for both of them.

He lived in the Victorian house on his family's ranch just a few miles outside of town, where he had grown up. The only time he had left Fort Evans was to do his tour of duty with the Army after High School. When his father died and left the hardware store to his care, he returned home.

His hobbies were few, he raised a handful of cattle, maintained a large vegetable garden and managed the Hardware Store. His life was comfortable and made even more so by the knowledge that he and Maureen were a solid couple.

She lived on a wide, tree-lined street just a few houses down from the Community Church. Neither had ever been married and had no inclination to be married. They enjoyed their own spaces and had their own routines. But the thought of not having their relationship was something that either ever gave the time of day.

As they left the diner, Maureen stopping to chat with friends at different tables on the way out. Ever the small-town politician, she took her mayor's duties quite seriously. She also wanted to take the temperature of the room to see if people knew about Ken's arrest. Elmer, quite used to her habits, stood patiently at the door.

Once she had extricated herself from Phoebe, he held the door for her and then again the passenger door to his Ford F150. He gave her his hand as she climbed in and then made sure she and her coat were safely inside before shutting the door.

“What was Phoebe going on about?” Elmer asked, as he eased the vehicle out of the parking lot and onto the roadway. “She seemed awfully excited about something.”

“Well, my darling, it appears that now that Howard is out of the picture, Susan has set her eyes on a new crush,” Maureen answered with a grin, her eyes twinkling with merriment.

“Wow, not even two days after losing her boyfriend, she’s already hot on the trail? Who is the poor devil? I’d like to warn him before she starts in on him.”

“Oh, you know him very well. Although I am not sure what Susan thinks she is going to do about his current girlfriend.”

“Let me guess, it is Tom at the feedstore. I’ve seen Susan hanging around there a few times. Roseann isn’t going to take too kindly to that!” Elmer laughed.

“No, you can guess all you want, but I will save you the trouble,” she said, “It is you!”

“Me? Oh my good Lord,” Elmer shook his head in disbelief.

“Think of it this way, it’s a good thing. She’s already interested in you; all you need to do is act like you are interested and she’ll start talking.”

He drove through the dark streets, passing Frank in his Chief’s truck who was headed in the opposite direction. Both gave the standard two finger off the steering wheel wave, as was customary in the valley.

Stars sparkled in the clear night sky as he drove away from Maureen’s house after dropping her off, walking her to her door and making sure she was safely inside. He touched his mustache and remembered their good night kiss.

Better Luck Next Time

Frank was waiting at the Gifted Horse coffee shop, chatting amicably with Emma when Claire arrived with Gracie. They passed a knowing glance before Claire and Emma shared a quick hug. Gracie was on her best behavior, sitting patiently, although her nose was twitching in anticipation of the spare piece of bacon or ham that she knew Emma would inevitably slip her when Claire's attention was elsewhere. As Frank and Claire chose their coffee of choice, Emma did just that, and Gracie licked her fingers.

Coffees in hand, Frank and Claire, along with the dog, took over a tall table with barstools. The height provided them with a view of the whole restaurant. There were about five tables occupied in addition to theirs and they knew most of the customers.

“Okay, I will take the quilters, the bridge club and the moms with the babies,” Claire said. “You take the forestry service guys, and the School District admins.”

“Gotcha!” Frank agreed as he stood and made his way over to the first table with four people dressed in the drab green uniforms of the U.S. Forest Service.

Claire also rose and instructed Gracie to stay before she went over to the older ladies who met weekly to create lovely handmade blankets for those in need.

While they worked the room, a familiar figure entered the establishment, clad in a black sweatshirt. Gracie's tail started thumping on the wooden floor as Gloria walked to the order counter. After getting her usual blueberry smoothie with extra whipped cream and side of the same sweet fluff, Gloria treated Gracie to the confection. She waved at Claire, who smiled at her indulgence before she left, the doorbell clanging merrily as she exited.

Something about Gloria triggered a memory for Claire, but as she continued her rounds, she pushed it out of her mind. No one had seen Howard since the day before the City Council meeting. One of the bridge club ladies said that she had bumped into Howard and Susan earlier that week at the grocery store.

“She was filling up the cart as usual with Mars Bars. Seriously, I think she knows when the candy delivery is because once she is through shopping, there aren’t any more chocolate bars to be seen!” Shirley gossiped to Claire.

“Howard seemed very full of himself as usual. But he seemed extra cocky, which seemed very silly as he pushed the cart behind Susan. What a pair!”

Claire thanked her for the information and asked everyone to call the Police Department if they remembered anything else. There, she thought, now Ted can’t get mad at me for asking questions. All I am doing is trying to help!

Gracie whined and Claire detached her leash from the chair leg. She nodded to Frank and he made his goodbyes to the school district administrative assistants. They left the diner together and started walking toward City Hall. She marveled at the beauty surrounding the small town, tall pine trees crowning the sheer ridges. At almost 5,000 elevation, the sky was a crisp blue with a few scattered clouds.

Other than Francine’s comment about Howard and Susan’s shopping trip, no one seemed to have seen the couple. They were quiet as they strolled down the main street, following the dog. Frank gave Claire’s shoulder a squeeze as he left to walk to the Fire Station.

“Let’s catch up later this afternoon,” he said. “I will keep talking to people today at work, We are missing something important, I just know it!”

Claire and Gracie arrived at the City Hall office at the same time Maureen was taking a lovely bouquet of late summer blooms and a spinach casserole to Susan's house. The two women waived at each other as they passed on opposite sides of the street.

Claire wondered who the flowers were for. From the direction the mayor was headed, she couldn't help but think she was going to Susan's house. Was she doing her own investigation? She made a mental note to email her later and ask her.

Maureen almost skipped down the street, delighted with her mission. The flowers were gaily wrapped with a yellow ribbon and the casserole was wrapped in one of the quilt ladies' fabric creations. She noted the admiring glances of passersby and smiled in return.

At Susan's door, she was appalled by the broken fence and crooked gate, as well as an overflowing trash can just outside the front door. Wiping the look of dismay from her face, she put on her best neighborly smile and pushed the doorbell. She could hear a loud buzzer echo through the old home and then the sound of heavy footsteps.

"What are you doing here?" Susan said grumpily as she grasped a too-small robe around her ample middle. "I wasn't expecting anyone".

Her annoyed tone changed when she saw the flowers and casserole. Eyeing Maureen suspiciously, she nonetheless grabbed the bouquet from the smaller woman's hand. She stepped back from the door, waving her hand as a greeting.

"Scuse the mess, it's the maid's day off," she guffawed loudly, which broke into a coughing fit.

Maureen entered and then stood holding the casserole. Looking at the dirty clothes scattered all over the kitchen floor, she peered around and saw the same type of situation in the living room. Each chair seat had some type of food container or pile of magazines on it. Not knowing what else to do, she handed Susan the casserole. She could hear the television blaring a game show in the next room. The air in the room was musty and off-putting.

“I know that you are in mourning, and I thought flowers and a hot dish would cheer you up.” Maureen said as she slid an empty ice cream container from one chair seat to another and sat down.

“Oh, yeah, this is very nice of you,” Susan acknowledged as she swept a stack of magazines off the chair opposite Maureen onto the floor. She plopped her bulk into the chair and opened the casserole wrap and took a big whiff.

Maureen, afraid to put her hands on the sticky table, folded them in her lap. She watched mystified as Susan picked up one dirty spoon after another from the table. Finally selecting one that appeared to be the least soiled, she began eating the casserole.

“So how are you coping dear? You must miss Howard very much,” Maureen began. She tried not to stare at the woman who was scooping up large amounts of the dish and stuffing them into her mouth.

“Oh, yeah, well y’know...” Susan said around a mouthful of food. She waved the spoon in the air as she slumped over the table, the other arm protectively encircling the ceramic vessel.

She kept on eating noisily, her face almost buried in the dish. Maureen tried to approach the subject again.

“When was the last time you saw him? I mean, alive of course,” Maureen asked, wishing she could wipe the blob of gruyere cheese from Susan’s first of three double chins.

“Oh, um, yeah, well, it’s hard for me to remember. I hit my head when I fell at the City Council meeting and then they gave me so many drugs at the hospital, I am kind of foggy on the details,” she said as she scraped the last remnants of the food from the sides of the dish.

Realizing that there was no more food, she shoved the empty casserole across the table to Maureen. She put both hands on the tabletop and grunted as she pushed herself up. Maureen felt the table wobble and had a panicky moment thinking it might break. She sighed with relief when Susan was safely on both feet.

The large woman moved once more to the door and opened it. She waved her arm toward Maureen and then gestured to the door. The mayor stood, straightened her clothes, and gathered the dish and its lovely, quilted wrapper before moving to leave. She took one last look at the room and shuddered slightly.

“Well, if you need to talk, you have my number. I hope you feel better soon!”

She heard the door bang shut behind her. The force of the motion startled a raccoon who had been rummaging around the trash can. It stared at the woman for a minute before ambling off toward the creek bed.

Maureen walked quickly away, taking deep breaths of fresh air. Whatever had Howard seen in her, she wondered as she traversed the few blocks to her own home. The tension in her shoulders released as she entered her own yard with its white picket fence and decorated gate. She noticed a few leaves on the cement walk and made a mental note to sweep them up later. She hated clutter!

Sourdough

Later that day, Claire and Hannah having finished the majority of their work, were taking a tea break when Gloria arrived at work. The older woman was carrying something wrapped in a cheesecloth. Gracie awoke from a nap, her wet black nose twitching at the scent of freshly baked bread.

“I brought you guys somethin’”, Gloria said as she proffered the package to Hannah. Then, reaching a hand into the pocket of her black hooded sweatshirt, she withdrew a stick of butter. “It is better with butter on it”.

“It smells really good, should we have some now? Would you like a cup of tea?” Hannah couldn’t keep from sounding shocked. For Gloria to appear in city hall during the day was one thing, but for her to bring food was quite another.

There seemed to be no end to the surprises happening in the office that week. Claire too, had a look of surprise on her face. Usually, they couldn’t get the reticent janitor to speak in more than monosyllables. And now she had just brought food to the office!

Hannah quickly made another cup of tea and started slicing the bread. She placed slices on decorative plates and then slathered butter on each warm piece. She motioned Gloria to the spare chair and passed a plate to each of them, She set down the cup of tea on the desk next to Gloria and then sat down.

Gloria tore off a piece of the bread and offered it to Gracie. The dog tenderly took the morsel from her fingers before gobbling it whole. All three of the women laughed simultaneously and the tension left the room.

Gloria started talking about how she had found a book on sourdough at the Library's recent book sale. She had begun making her own sourdough starter. She had bought a bread maker at the thrift store in the neighboring town, and it worked. She continued talking, noting that she had found that the starter 'grew best' in cold dark places. Finishing her bread, tea and her story, she looked up quickly. Hannah and Claire had been totally silent while she had shared her tale. Both were still staring at her, entranced by the sudden revelation.

"This was delicious," said Claire quickly. Hannah nodded in agreement.

"Please give me the recipe, I want to try to make this at home," said Hannah.

"Oh, er, well, yes, I will. But I had better get to work now," Gloria stammered as she hastily got up to leave the office.

"Keep the rest of the bread, I am baking more now that I have all my starter back in my kitchen. Bye!"

As she raced out of the office, slamming the half door behind her, Hannah, Claire, and Gracie all turned to each other with stunned expressions. The yeasty smell of the bread lingered in the office and they could hear Gloria's footsteps running up the stairs. Something about the whole encounter struck a suspicious chord with Claire.

"What was that all about?" Hannah asked her boss with a puzzled expression.

"I don't know, but parts of her story are tickling something in my memory. I don't know if I told you, but the night of the foiled City Council meeting, after everyone had left, I saw a dark figure hurrying from the back of the building" Claire said slowly. "Whoever it was seemed familiar, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it."

“Do you think it was the killer? Do you have any idea who it was?” Hannah asked anxiously. “Are you okay? You look a little pale. Should I call Frank?”

Claire smiled at the younger woman. She glanced at the clock and saw it was past quitting time. Gracie put her head in Gracie’s lap and gave a low whine.

“I am really fine. I don’t know the answers yet, but I think I might just have an idea. Take the rest of the bread with you please, I haven’t had any time to do yoga in these past few days and I want to be able to continue to fit in my clothes!” Claire answered.

“Are you sure? I know my little cousins will love it...and so do I,” Hannah said. “Do you want to meet up at the trailhead sometime this weekend? I’d like to find that gold mine I read about. Wouldn’t it be exciting to find gold after all these years?”

“Yes, that would be a great way to spend some time this weekend, but I think we need to find the real killer before we go gold hunting. If you want to take Gracie with you on your hike, please come get her. I have a feeling that I am going to continue sleuthing for answers,” Claire answered.

The two women shut down their computers, turned the office hours sign to “Closed” and locked up the office. In the parking lot they parted ways, Hannah getting into her Honda Civic that was older than she was and Claire and Gracie walking across the street. With a wave and a honk, they wished each other a good night, not noticing the Pontiac Grand Am parked just behind the line of bushes.

A Date in the Cemetery

Elmer paced nervously as he waited for Susan to arrive. He glanced at the road leading into the Oddfellows section of the Fort Evans District Cemetery. It was a beautiful afternoon. The sun was shining, the wind was still and the pine trees were filled with chirping and singing birds. He wished he didn't have to deal with Susan and her drama, but he was willing to endure the next hour if he could just find out who really sent Howard to his maker.

Just as he made his peace with the plan, he saw Susan's Pontiac Grand Am swing around the corner. The distinctive purple flames adorning the hood were accented by the neon orange hair gleaming through the open window. Elmer straightened his shoulders and prepared for his mission. Susan parked the car and then not so gracefully exited the compact car.

"Oh you who, Elmer!" she called out in a high falsetto. "I am here!"

A distinctively pained expression poured over his face as Kevin took in the visage that was Susan. She was wearing a bright green floral top that flowed over her ample form and the largest white capris he had ever seen. Coupled with her orange hair, she resembled the Irish flag. As she ambled over, he steeled himself for the onslaught.

"I can do this, I can do this, I can do this," he said to himself. "Crimney, I sound like that children's book about the little blue engine!" The thought somehow encouraged him. "If she could pull the train filled with toys and good things for little boys and girls to eat over the hill, I can pretend to be interested in Susan."

After a few minutes, she finally made her way to Elmer standing by the plot that Howard had previously picked out for himself and his then wife. He had brought the selection of faux headstones for Susan to choose from, as well as the cost sheet. He made an effort to put an arm

around the woman, bending away from her just enough to only allow the most minimal actual contact, as he saw the sweat beading on her face.

“Hello Susan, how are you doing? I know this must be extremely difficult for you, but I want you to know that I am here to help you,” Elmer said in a soothing tone.

“Oh Elmer! What would I possibly do without you?” Susan made an attempt to flutter her poorly applied fake eyelashes at him as she leaned closer. The attempt failed badly as the right set of eyelashes pulled away from her eyelid and came to rest on her cheek. She didn’t seem to notice as she gazed affectionately at the handsome older man.

Pulling away gently, Elmer made a motion deflecting her comment. He composed his face and did his best to smile at her. He thought of Claire and Maureen and steeled his resolve to get some real information from Susan.

“Let’s get the hard part out of the way, shall we? This is the gravesite that Harold purchased several years ago. As you can see it is a double plot, he intended it for himself and his first wife, but now I guess you might want to rest alongside him?” Elmer suggested.

Susan barely glanced at the site. Her attention was focused on Elmer. She shifted her weight to move closer to him. He watched as she put on a coquettish grin, unaware that one of her fake eyelashes was resting on her cheek. He resisted the urge to remove it.

“You decide whatever you think is best,” Susan said with a giggle. “I don’t know anything about graves or headstones. But I do know a lot about other things...” she said as she swung her generous hips in a wide arc.

Stifling a gagging reflex, Elmer knew this was the opportunity that he and Maureen had been hoping for. Surrendering his ego to the wind, as well as his self-respect, he put his arms as far around Susan as they could reach. He held his breath while he planted a kiss on the top of her flaming orange coiffure.

In an amazing move, Susan spun around quickly and pressed herself into the much thinner man. She wrapped her arms around him in a tight vise, that caused Elmer to expel all the breath in his lungs. Then, she turned her face up to him expectantly. Much taller, Elmer raised his face to the heavens as if asking for strength.

He brushed her cheek with his lips and then extricated himself from her embrace. She swooned dramatically and then gazed at him adoringly. She seemed to almost melt into herself as she feasted her eyes on him, folding both hands in front of her heart.

Elmer placed his hands on hers. He took a deep breath. It was now or never.

“Do you really feel like I do? I’ve watched you for so long, but you were always with Howard. I know he just passed, but is there a chance for you and I?” Elmer felt like an actor in a movie, which was the only way he could play the part of an ardent suitor.

“Oh yes, yes, yes! I do, I have wanted you for so long, but you have been hung up with that awful Maureen. I didn’t really want to be with Howard, but I didn’t mean to kill him....” Susan’s voice trailed off as she realized what she had said.

Elmer stiffened but knew if he could get her to continue talking, Ken would be freed and life could go back to the way it was before. He and Maureen could continue their wonderful relationship and those dearest to him, Claire at the top of the list, would be free from all of the turmoil and drama.

“Darling, I am sure you never meant to hurt anyone!” Elmer assured the flustered woman. “You are the sweetest, kindest, most enchanting lady I have ever met. I want to help you, sweetheart, so that we can be together forever,” he declared.

Susan, confident in her feminine allure, grabbed his face and started smooching him repeatedly. Elmer, continuing to hold his breath, did his best not to show his revulsion. Susan took his rigidity as manliness and continued her onslaught. Finally she relented.

“This is such a relief! I can’t even tell you!” Susan continued her babbling and Elmer reached into his breast jacket pocket and switched on the tiny tape recorder.

He struggled to keep his face pleasing as she spewed out her story. He listened as she detailed the story of the night before the City Council meeting. She and Howard had bullied Gloria into leaving them alone in the office after hours so that they could steal a key to the basement. They had gone descended the dark stairs later that night to search for documents that they thought would prove that Ken had been bilking the city for money. But, on the steep staircase, she fell into Howard and they had toppled together to the bottom of the stairs.

“I didn’t mean to kill him,” she wailed, throwing herself again into Elmer’s arms. “But when I was finally able to roll off of him, he was DEAD!”

“Now, now, you did nothing wrong,” Elmer patted her back apathetically. “How did he get from the basement to his driveway?”

She reached up and touched his face, “Oh my gosh, you are so handsome! Are you sure I am going to be safe? I couldn’t imagine going to jail when I could be going home with you. I’ve always wanted to be the lady of the Evinrude Estate!”

“Of course, it was an accident! You are entirely safe. Just tell me what happened next,” he took a breath of fresh air and concentrated on making sure the recorder was close enough to Susan’s mouth to pick up the confession.

“After I realized poor Howard was...gone, I called my boys and told them to get there as quickly as possible. I had them load him into Josh’s truck and then they had the great idea to leave him in his driveway. Idiots! I told them to take him to the abandoned gold mine off of the trailhead on Scott Bar way, but no! They were too lazy to drive all the way up there,” she continued, disparaging her sons.

Elmer couldn’t believe it! Here was the truth and the key to freeing Ken from jail. His breath came a little harder as he thought about his next move. He had to get away from Susan and get the recording to Ted. Thinking quickly, he looked at his watch.

“Oh my honey pie, I am so sorry, but I have to get back to work! It is the shift change at the Hardware Store and if I don’t get back then Lindsey will be late to pick her daughter up from Preschool,” he said as he stroked her arm.

“When can we see each other again?” Susan breathed into him as she once again swung her hips in what she felt was an alluring move.

Elmer side stepped the move quickly, his middle-aged hips couldn’t take another hit from her much sturdier bulk. Thinking quickly, he once again changed the look of horror on his face to one of adoring anticipation. He stifled the gag in his throat and spoke in a low, and he hoped loving tone.

“I will call you as soon as I am free,” Elmer promised, pressing her hands and moving them away from his chest. “My dear, you know I can’t be away from you for long.”

He began walking as quickly as he could away from her, but turned to give a wave before he rounded the bend and began running to his truck. Breathing hard, he opened the door and jumped in. He checked the recorder and saw that it was halfway through the tape. He shut it off and turned the key on. He found his cell phone and called Maureen.

A Beautiful Day

Claire woke to an Indian Summer morning. She was surprised to find that she had slept in. And even more surprised that Gracie had let her! The shepherd sat next to the head of the bed; her eyes focused on Claire. A smile started to cross the young woman's face, but then the feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach erased it. Ken was still in jail, and she was no closer to finding the real killer. Sighing, she did her usual stretching routine before exiting her bed.

Feeling lazy, she dressed in her usual running sweats and pulled on her Ugg boots. Not caring enough to brush her curls, she tied her hair in a messy bun before washing her face. Looking in the mirror she noted the worry lines that had seemed to deepen overnight.

Gracie followed her silently as Claire began her morning routine. Checking the dog's dish, she refilled both the feed and the water. Gracie was uninterested and continued shadowing her human as Claire started the coffee pot. She noted that the river of fog was nowhere to be seen this morning. Maybe she should go hiking with Hannah to the gold mine, she thought as the coffee started filling the carafe.

Taking the last slice of banana bread and her cup of coffee, Claire decided to soak up some of the sun. She opened the door to her small backyard and took a seat at the white wrought iron table. The metal was cold and she was grateful for the cushions on the chair. Gracie hopefully brought a ball over to her and dropped it at her feet. This time the smile on Claire's face stayed as she ruffled the dog's ears.

"You are such a good girl. Thank you for letting me sleep in. I really needed that extra hour," Claire murmured quietly.

She picked up the ball and tossed it down the length of the yard. Gracie ran after it, but instead of retrieving it, she became more interested in smelling the scents left by the nocturnal animals that also frequented the yard during the night.

Claire had just finished her breakfast when Gracie came running back, wagging her tail excitedly. Before she heard the doorbell, the shepherd was already at the side gate. Much to her surprise, Maureen and Elmer were on her front porch.

“Hi! I’m back here,” Claire called over the garden gate.

“Good morning,” Maureen greeted her young friend as well as the dog. “Oh, it looks like we are too late with this,” she added holding up a tray of coffees and a bag of something that smelled suspiciously like blueberry scones.

The couple joined Claire at the small table. The sun flooded the yard and the warmth seemed to radiate a kind of happiness of its own. A hummingbird buzzed over and took a quick drink from the bubbling fountain and then jumped in for a bath. More birds chirped and sang, adding to the summertime feel of the early fall morning.

“To what do I owe this lovely pleasure?” Claire asked as she accepted the steaming cup and crusty warm scone.

“Well! Have we got a lot to tell you!” Maureen laughed. “But maybe you should just listen to this first!”

The trio listened to the muffled tape recording of Susan and Elmer’s encounter from the day before. Claire’s eyes grew wide as Susan confessed to accidentally killing Howard. She

grimaced when she heard Elmer calling Susan ‘darling’. When the tape was finished, she jumped up, crumbs from her scone landing at Gracie’s waiting muzzle.

“Let’s go! We need to take this to Ted! Ken can be freed today!,” she gushed excitedly. Noticing that her friends were still sitting complacently, she sat back down. “What’s wrong? Have you already taken it to the police? Is Ken already home?”

Elmer and Maureen exchanged a glance. Elmer started to speak, but Maureen placed a well-manicured hand on his arm. She took a sip of coffee and wiped the lipstick stain from the plastic rim before focusing her attention on Claire.

A Small Problem

“We did take the recording to Ted. Although he agrees a confession is a confession is a confession, taping someone without their consent makes the tape inadmissible. We need a witness to her confession, otherwise it is just a case of ‘he said, she said’,” Maureen explained.

Claire felt her shoulders drop and she instinctively reached for Gracie for comfort. The dog half climbed into her lap and licked her face. Taking the dog’s head in her hands, Claire leaned her forehead on the dogs and breathed in and out slowly. Feeling better, she raised her head, patted the dog and turned back to the anxiously waiting couple.

‘Wait! I just thought of something! Susan said that her sons moved Howard’s body. What if we can get them to spill the beans?’ “she suggested hopefully.

This time Elmer put his hand on Maureen’s shoulder. Claire noticed the gesture and hoped that someday she would have a relationship like theirs. The way they communicated with touch and gestures seemed to be the ultimate intimacy.

“That is a wonderful idea. But we are dealing with Lonnie and Donnie, they are scared to death of their mother. While they aren’t the sharpest tools in the shed, I am not sure they are willing to risk Susan’s wrath, even if it meant keeping them out of trouble,” Elmer said.

Claire began pacing, absentmindedly deadheading the final petunia blossoms while she circled the small garden. When she wasn’t picking the dead flowers, she tossed the ball the Gracie. Maureen and Elmer watched her, sensing that she was formulating a plan.

“I think I have an idea, but I am going to need your help...and Frank’s,” she announced. “Can you meet me at City Hall at dusk, say 6 o’clock?”

The older couple nodded and picking up the remnants of their breakfast said their farewells. Gracie, now satiated from playing rolled onto her back for tummy scratches. Elmer couldn't resist the pup and did just that while Maureen hugged Claire.

"If you need anything, just call. Otherwise we will see you at 6 p.m.," Maureen assured her. "Oh, should we walk over? Do we need to hide our cars? Should we dress in black?"

"Yes! Great plan! Just meet me in the office, come in the side door. I'm going to get Susan to talk and you will be the witnesses," Claire explained excitedly. "Oh and may I keep this?" She pointed to the tape recorder.

"Of course, whatever you need! You are going to contact Frank and Ted, correct?" Maureen said. "I mean if she could do in her boyfriend, I am worried that she won't have any qualms about erasing you as a problem as well!"

"You know it! This is going to work, I feel it in my bones," Claire announced as they left the garden. "Have a great day, I've got a lot to do to prepare. See you at 6-sharp!"

The Killer Exposed

Feeling energized and hopeful, Claire almost danced into her house. She took a shower and while she shampooed her hair her thoughts were full of the plan and its details. Lost in thought, she shut the water off and pulling the shower curtain back, she saw that she hadn't rinsed all the bubbles from her locks.

Laughing, she turned the water back on and finished the job. Without adding the step of conditioner, she knew that her hair would be totally unmanageable and instead of curls, her head would be surrounded by a halo of frizz.

She dressed carefully, taking care to make sure she looked professional, but also in practical attire just in case she needed to make a fast get away, or get physical with Susan. She shuddered at the thought and then brushed her teeth. She applied makeup and saw that the worry lines from earlier this morning had now receded. She smiled again as she applied the rose-colored lip gloss.

Grabbing her phone, she texted Frank asking him if he were free for a hike on Chapparral. Feeling overanxious, she knew that she needed to get some of her ya-yas out before tackling the task at hand. She also hoped that the hike would help to keep Gracie calm during the evening's adventures. While she may only hike two miles, Gracie ran at least 10 times that up and down the hills, through the forest and into the creeks.

She grinned when Frank texted back his positive response. A flush rose on her chest and up onto her throat as memory of his last kiss floated in her mind. The excitement about her plan coupled with the stirrings of romance only heightened her good mood.

Grabbing Gracie's 'Best Friend' harness and her leash, Claire didn't even need to give her dog the hand signal to 'load up'. She opened the back passenger door to her Subaru Outback and Gracie jumped in, taking her position at the window. Claire slid into the driver seat and pushed the vehicle ignition button. As the car started, the song, 'It's a Beautiful Day' was playing on the Sirius XM station.

"Yes, it is a beautiful day," Gracie agreed as she sang along. She reached up, touching the spring-loaded cabinet that held her sunglasses and put them on. She made sure she had both her water bottle and Gracie's, as well as her fanny pack that held both. Hiking always calmed her nerves. "Let's go!" she said as she backed out of the carport.

She drove through town slowly, being careful not to go over the 30 m.p.h. speed limit, and then sped up to 55 once the highway cut through the alfalfa fields on either side. Reaching the base of Chapparal Mountain took less than 10 minutes. She was happy to see that Frank's civilian gold Ram truck was already there. She admired his tall, muscular frame as she parked next to him.

Getting out, she snapped Gracie's leash onto her harness. She smiled at Frank as he took the lead from her, so that she could strap on her fanny pack and arrange the water bottles one on either side of her lower back. It felt like a well-choreographed dance, one they had performed many times. Once prepared, they started off. It would be a half mile before they could let Gracie off the leash to run free and she appreciated Frank's handling of the pup, saving her the strain.

"Alright, pretty lady, when are you going to fill me in?" Frank asked once Gracie was let loose from her restraint.

Claire shared all the morning's events before playing the recording for him. He was quiet, with alternating solemn and concerned looks crossing his handsome face. They paused at the top of the last summit and shared the water bottle. Gracie joined them and Claire squirted the water bottle into a stream which the dog lapped. The dog was breathing hard, so they sat on the fallen oak tree overlooking the valley.

Frank put his arm around Claire and Gracie circled three times before flopping at their feet. The sun was warmer now, and a light breeze stirred the leaves in the trees. Higher up on the mountain, the sound of the wind in the 100' tall pines provided a backdrop to the music of the birds calling to one another. The distinctive sound of a Ring-Necked Siskiyou Dove caught Claire's attention and she turned her head to see where the bird was hiding.

As she did so, Frank took the opportunity to kiss her again. This time the contact lasted longer. She laced her arms around his shoulders and leaned into the embrace. She could feel the sun on the back of her head and through the slits of her lightly closed eyes she could see Frank's eyes also closed. She breathed in the warm, slightly sweaty smell of him and realized that she loved him. She felt her heart jump and then Gracie was between them.

Laughing, the two young people got up and brushed themselves off. Claire calmed the dog and they sent off down the hill. This time she and Frank held hands.

As they walked she filled him in on her plan to get Susan to come to the City Hall office and confess to her by playing her parts of the recording, while Maureen and Elmer hid behind the desks. As an extra precaution, she and Ted had already planned that he would listen in through Claire's cell phone. She asked Frank if he could also be in the building just in case something unexpected happened.

“As if you could keep me away!,” he pulled her to him again. “But, you’re going to owe me,” he teased. “Once this is all over, you and I are going out to Callahan’s to celebrate with a fancy steak dinner. Promise me?”

“You got it!”, Claire loved Callahan’s. The restaurant was part of the Callahan’s Lodge, on the Oregon border. Although the drive was a little longer than Claire liked, it was the special place where she and her parents celebrated all life’s biggest moments. It was a birthday tradition, as well as the site of all her graduation parties. It just made sense that she and Frank would make their own memories there.

Reaching the cars, Claire unlocked the back door and Gracie climbed in, now tired from her hike. Walking around to the driver’s door, Frank opened it. Before she could sit down, he pulled her to him again. This time the kiss seemed like the most natural thing in the world. Gracie felt for the first time in a long time that everything was going to be alright.

The Third Act

Bolstered by the hike, and the promise of a relationship with Frank, Claire steeled herself for the possibility of Susan not cooperating with her plan. She decided to contact her as soon as she got on the road home. Claire found her contact information on her cell phone and hit the call button. To her surprise, Susan answered on the first ring!

“Hi, um, Susan?”, Claire began.

“Oh hi Claire! How are you today? Isn’t it a beautiful day? What can I do for you today?” Susan almost sang into the phone.

Shocked by the woman’s unusually bright and cheery response, Claire was taken aback for a moment. Taking a deep breath, the sleuth went over the script in her head. She needed to make Susan believe that she was on her side in the battle to oust Ken. Her mouth suddenly went dry, and she took a swallow of water from the bottle on the car seat next to her.

“Well, it is more like what can I do for you. I found some information about Ken that just might help you convince the rest of the city council that it is high time for him to take a hike,” Claire said in what she hoped was a conspiratorial tone.

Susan seemed to hesitate before answering. During the few seconds before her response, Claire found herself holding her breath. Sensing that she needed to be more direct, she continued speaking.

“You know that \$3 million he stole from the Fire Department? Well, I found the bank records that support that theory! I have the bank statements to prove it! I just can’t be the one to take it to the police because I am the City Clerk, it is an um...conflict of interest,” she said

quickly, her fingers unconsciously crossing in hopes that she had convinced Susan of her earnestness.

“Ooooh, yees!” Susan practically purred into the phone. “I knew he had done it!”

Glad to know her plan was working, Claire plunged into the rest of her story.

“Can you meet me at City Hall tonight at, let’s say, 6. I can give you copies of the documents. You will be the hero of the town when you expose Ken as the criminal we all know he is.”

Claire was almost at her house and she wanted to end the call as quickly as possible before Susan had any doubts. She took another drink of water and forced herself to breath slowly and steadily. Gracie lifted her head from her paws on the backseat and rose up on all fours as she realized they were home.

“Sure! See you then!” Susan rang off.

Wasting no time, Claire texted Maureen, Elmer, Frank and Ted that the plan was a go. All send thumbs up in reply. Except Frank’s thumbs up also include a smiley face with three little hearts.

The Final Act

Dusk was falling as Claire walked across the street and passed the park. Shadows were changing colors from a light violet to darker blues and purples as the sun faded behind the eastern mountains. A cooler breeze played with her hair as she saw the first finger of the fog snaking its way from the south. The beauty of the evening seemed to calm her nerves as she unlocked the door to her office.

She was just turning on her computer when a brief knock at the side door made her jump. She moved across the small office quickly, almost knocking over the Christmas cactus perched on the counter separating the public space from the inter office. At the back door were Maureen and Elmer, all dressed in black. Claire was happy to note that the mayor had left her signature scent at home.

With all of the blinds shut, and only her desk light on, Claire let them in silently as she motioned them to take their spots behind her and Ken's desks. She handed Elmer her phone and motioned to the screen where Ted's number was already pulled up.

"My phone is on silent and Ted knows when you call that he is to listen to Susan's confession," she whispered.

While she spoke a text came in from Frank, which caused her to blush. He had written that he was in place, but had added words about her being beautiful, as well as a heart emoji. Elmer smiled at her as he read the message and gave her a thumbs up.

A knock at the door startled everyone in the office and Claire motioned her friends to take their positions. She rose and straightened her shoulders. She took the sheets of paper from her desk, and then hid the tape recorder under the stack before opening the door.

Susan swept into the office, immediately filling the small space. Either excitement or the exertion of climbing the small flight of steps had caused beads of perspiration to send her thick foundation running in rivulets down to her eyebrows. Claire was momentarily taken aback at the woman's new clownish orange hairdo and wondered how on earth she got it to be that particular shade.

Shaking her head, she turned away to glance back at the office space beyond the half door. She couldn't see anyone and she didn't hear anything in the dim light. She hoped that Susan couldn't either. The ticking of the clock grew louder.

"Well, where is it? I don't have all day, I am waiting for a call from my new boyfriend, Elmer. You know Elmer don't you? He's so dreamy and he's just wild about me," Susan gabbed on excitedly while waving her hands in the air causing her heavy arms to flap against her sides.

"Elmer? Er, um, yes. I do have the documents right here," Claire showed her the paperwork in her hands quickly, hoping that Susan couldn't see that it was actually the city's P&L for last month. "But first I want you to listen to something that you might find even more interesting."

Claire hit the play button on the recorder and Susan's voice filled the office. The larger woman seemed to freeze and her eyes grew round as she heard herself saying that she had killed Howard. Claire held her breath as she listened. She stopped the tape. The office was silent.

The clock ticked and Susan looked around wildly. Then her eyes narrowed and Claire stepped back as she advanced toward her. Claire felt for the half door behind her and slipped behind it. Susan's breath came hard and fast and her face turned the color of a hot house tomato.

“I don’t know what you think you are playing at girl!” she said stabbing a finger an inch from Claire’s face. “I didn’t kill Howard! Ken did! Everyone knows that!” She wheeled her massive bulk around and headed for the door.

Before she could reach it, the door opened and Gloria stood there. Elmer and Maureen stood up from their hiding positions and Frank appeared at the back door. Susan was trapped and she whirled around to face everyone.

“Yes, you did kill Howard,” Gloria said quietly. “I saw you both when you went into the basement that day because I was already there. You fell on him and you tumbled down the stairs. When you got up, he didn’t move.”

Five pairs of eyes were glued to the tiny janitor. No one moved. Susan’s labored breathing grew louder. Gloria advanced into the room, backing the large woman up against the counter.

“Then you called someone and two men showed up. They wrapped Howard’s body in the old rug from the Library and hauled him up the stairs. They dropped him a couple of times on the way up. It was horrible, I still see it sometimes when I am trying to go to sleep.” Gloria shuddered as if reliving the scene.

Everyone’s head turned as the sound of a siren broke the relatively quiet. The flash of blue and red lights lit up the office and Ted rushed in the side door. He quickly breached the half-door and using two sets of handcuffs, he secured Susan.

“No, no, she is lying! They are all lying! I didn’t kill Howard, Ken did! I don’t know what she’s talking about. Take these handcuffs off of me!” Susan bellowed. “Police brutality! You are all my witnesses,” she screeched as Ted tried to maneuver her through the doorway,

Ignoring her protests, he began citing the standard rights speech as he muscled her to his waiting cruiser. Frank moved to Claire's side and put his arm around her shoulder. Maureen and Kevin embraced as well, Maureen's head on his chest as he patted her back.

As Ted drove away, they could still hear Susan protesting loudly. "You won't get away with this! I'm on the City Council! I'm an elected official! I'm your BOSS!"

The tension in the room now broken, everyone began to laugh at the woman's hysterics. ‘

Claire turned to Gloria and thanked her profusely for corroborating the story.

"But what were you doing in the basement?" Claire asked.

Gloria looked down at her shoes and shuffled her feet. She screwed up her face. Taking a deep breath, she explained.

"It's my sourdough starter. I've been keeping it down there because it really likes it. I didn't want anyone to know, I thought I might get fired, so I kept silent. I came here tonight to write a note letting you know about Susan and Howard," she said. "I couldn't stand keeping the secret any longer. I didn't want Ken to go to prison for something I knew he didn't do."

Claire let out a snort and then burst out laughing in relief. Maureen began giggling and Frank and Kevin chortled in unison. Even Gloria joined in and soon all were lost in a joyful choir of mirth.

And Just Like That, All is Well that Ends Well

A few months later, Claire and Gracie bundled up to take their morning walk. Snow had fallen over night and theirs were the first footprints to mar the perfectly white carpet covering the streets and sidewalks. Limbs on the trees, though bare of leaves, now bent under the weight of the frozen precipitation.

Seeing that the streets were clear, she removed the leash from Gracie's collar when they reached the open field by the Mason's Hall. The dog excitedly ran in circles before sliding into a roll in a drift. Claire made a snowball and threw it, Gracie jumped up and caught it in her mouth.

Laughing, Claire made another and the two played the game for a few minutes.

"Did you know that the Eskimos have over 300 words for snow?" Claire questioned her dog.

"No, I didn't know that."

Claire turned and saw Frank approaching them. She smiled at her boyfriend, before tossing the snowball in her hand at him. He stopped and then stooped down and scooped up his own snowball before tossing it at her.

"Now you are in for it!" she said, grabbing another handful of snow.

He rushed up to her before she could throw anymore and encircled her in his arms. Gracie ran around them barking excitedly as they embraced.

Suddenly, Frank dropped to one knee. Claire thinking he was getting more snow, stepped back and turned as if to run away. She saw him pull something from his pocket and her breath caught in her throat.

“Claire Cartwright, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?” he said as he opened the box showing her a small diamond ring.

She got down on her knees too and wrapped her arms around him.

“Yes! Yes!”

The two young people embraced and as they kissed, Gracie ran full bore into them, knocking them all down into the deep snow.

The snow began to fall again as they righted themselves.

“I guess that is a yes for her too?” Frank said as he gave Claire a hand up.

“I believe it is! Let’s go to Emma’s and share the good news!”

The trio made their way through the snow to the coffee shop. As they entered, the chain of bells ringing on the door, Claire was startled to see all of their friends!

“Congratulations!” Ted, Elmer, Susan, Emma, Gloria, Hannah, Ken, Phoebe and Shirley yelled at once before crowding in to offer hugs.

“You were pretty sure I was going to say ‘yes’, weren’t you?” Claire teased Frank as they accepted their friends’ best wishes.

The group of friends shared coffee and pastries as they exchanged ideas for the wedding. Claire smiled at all of them, warmed not only by the beverages, but from the warmth of her beloved community.

Epilogue

It was the one of the loveliest of spring days the town of Fort Evans had seen in a few years. The community church bells rang out over the budding fruit trees in the courtyard. The timid sun shone on the tender pink and white blossoms peeking through their translucent leaves. The fields were tinged with the first green sheen of the alfalfa harvest, as the creek cut a blue path through them. Daffodils and wild violets dotted the lawn in front of the church, and the peonies poked their first red leaves through the soil.

The doors burst open and Frank and Claire stepped out, followed by all their friends. Birds flew in excited circles as the sprays of bird seed fell over the happy couple as they rushed down the church steps.

Frank held Claire's hand tight as they turned to wave goodbye as he opened the door of his gold Ram, Gracie, resplendent in her flowered collar jumped in the back seat before Frank helped his new bride manage her dress as she took her place in the passenger seat. He ran around to the driver side of the vehicle and hopped in.

The engine roared as he maneuvered out onto the highway. Claire tossed her bouquet out the window and Maureen reached up a hand to catch it. Before she could, Hannah dove and swept it out of her reach. Elmer and Ken smiled as Hannah buried her face in the lilacs. Gloria laughed from the top of the stairs, but then she noticed something amiss.

What was that white thing over by the swing set? It looked kind of like a body...

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