

# Unwanted Discovery

By Sandra Denbo and Tamarine Vilar

## Preface

# The Accident

Saturday, July 10

Dreading the coming confrontation with his dad, Andy rehearsed how he would explain why he was so late. *I had a flat tire. Then when I took Tiffany home, her dad gave me the third degree. It wasn't my fault.* Hoping that explanation would be enough, he decided to call after turning the next corner. He diverted his eyes from the road for just a moment to reach for his phone. When he looked up, he saw a shocked face directly in front of him. He dropped the phone and slammed on his brakes, but the old woman went down anyway. Paralyzed with horror, he gripped the steering wheel for several seconds until he could think. Since the streetlight was burned out, he left the lights on, set the brake, turned off the engine and jumped out of the car to see if she was okay. She was lying on the ground just in front of his bumper. She was yelling at him, all he could focus on were her piercing angry eyes.

“What have I done?! I could have killed you!” He hurried back to his phone to call 911. He tried to help her stand up but that just brought on more yelling – this time with profanities and a swinging fist.

Andy paced until a squad car arrived, which took about five minutes. The officer got out, took a look at the woman and said, “Alice Frainey? Remember me, I’m Officer Jackson. Don’t worry, the ambulance will be here soon. You just lie still and the paramedics will take care of you as soon as they get here.”

She directed her curses at him. Knowing her, he took that to mean she understood. He started to pick up the spilled contents of her designer purse. Andy realized he’d been too distressed to notice her things were scattered everywhere. When he offered to help, Officer Jackson ordered him not to touch anything.

The ambulance arrived as Officer Jackson put her things back in her purse and made a call on the woman’s cell phone, which had fallen out. He told the person on the other end about the accident, put the phone in her purse and handed everything to the paramedics.

As the ambulance siren faded away, the officer turned to Andy.

“I have some questions for you,” he said.

## Chapter 1

# Alice's Attic

Monday, July 19

Sharon Cooper and her eighteen-year-old daughter, Callie, had just unlocked a trunk in the stuffy, cluttered attic. Sharon looked around, "Let's find something to sit on so we can see what's in here."

"There's an old garden bench behind this pile of boxes over here. There's a slat missing from the back but it looks sturdy."

"That must be why it's up here. It's not perfect anymore." Sharon shrugged. "Imperfection wouldn't fit the grand image that Alice worked so hard to create in this mansion."

Callie shook her head in disbelief as she made her way over to the bench.

"By looking around up here, you'd never know that I already removed a lot of stuff yesterday; there's still so much."

"Okay, I made a path."

Together they said, "Where do you think we should put it?"

Even though Callie was her daughter, they were more in sync than the best of friends. They often said the same thing at the same time and with the same inflection. When this happened, friends often looked at them strangely. Like when they were deciding where to put the bed in Alice's new room – out of the blue, they pointed to the far corner and said in unison, "How about right there?" As always, Callie feigned indignity and looked at Sharon with mock anger as she said, "Get out of my head!" As usual, they both laughed.

"How about in this space next to the trunk?" Sharon suggested, Sharon helped her move it. The bench creaked when they sat down and they rubbed their hands on their jeans to wipe off the dust.

Sharon smiled at Callie, "This old trunk is the first promising thing we've found since we started this." Although Sharon's strawberry blonde hair was in a pony tail, some stray hairs fell into her hazel eyes as she leaned forward. She brushed them aside with one hand as she eagerly reached into the trunk with the other.

Callie's large green eyes focused on the first object her mother pulled out, a large, old hatbox. She smiled as she leaned in to get a better view and her long, wavy, red ponytail fell over her shoulder.

As Sharon went through the contents of the hatbox, she smiled, "This is interesting. It's full of old wedding invitations, birth announcements, death notices and cards. Oh, there are some newspaper articles at the bottom, too." As Sharon leafed through them, her excitement waned.

"Do you know any of those people?"

"No." Her hands went to her lap as she continued, "Alice never told me anything about our family history, so I wouldn't know if they were related or not. A couple of the names sound vaguely familiar, though." She picked them up again to check again.

“Why don’t we take them home and look up the ancestry websites? If they’re family, I’ll find something.”

Sharon patted Callie’s hand. “Thanks, honey, I’d love that. It’s a good thing you’re helping me.”

Callie grinned. “Well, yeah, you’d obviously be lost without me.”

“You stinker.” Sharon chuckled and then smacked her on the arm. She cocked an eyebrow, waved a warning finger at her and then reached into the trunk to pull out a photo album. As she leafed through it, she sighed, “I don’t recognize any of these people either.” Then she picked up five framed photos and two framed oil paintings, “More strangers. But then I guess I didn’t expect to recognize anyone.” She sighed.

Next, she picked up a collector’s book of silver dollars. The dates ranged from 1920 to 1950 with most of the spaces filled. She set it aside, “These might be worth something. We’ll have to get them appraised.” When Sharon pulled out a shoebox with twine tied around it, her heart quickened and she paused. She looked at Callie and smiled briefly. “Do you think these could be love letters?”

“Well, let’s look!”

Anticipation shook her fingers as she opened the box with care. “Well, they are old letters.” When she looked at them more carefully, she paused. Letters from three strangers stared at her. They were all addressed to her dad and stored by date with the oldest at the bottom. The oldest letter, postmarked more than forty years ago, was written by a young child. With a sense of foreboding, she opened it.

“What?!” The air seemed to leak from her lungs. The bench creaked again as she leaned back to breathe. Her head slowly went back and her limp hands loosely held the letter in her lap.

Callie took her mother’s hand, looked at the letter and groaned, “Oh, Mom.”

Sharon croaked, “Dad, how could you?”

They stared at each other for a several seconds.

Sharon swallowed hard. “Could Dad really have another family?”

“Let’s just read through the rest to find out everything we can.”

Sharon nodded slowly.

The letters were from three little girls, all addressed to her dad. The youngest girl’s letters started about five years after the other two. At first, these girls begged their daddy to come back. After a few years, it seemed like they eventually accepted his absence and the letters became less frequent. The last letter was a short note from Arlene, the oldest, to tell him she was getting married. That was almost thirty years ago.

Sharon mumbled, “Why wasn’t I ever told about them?” She sat up like a bolt and Callie jumped. “Alice *had* to know about this! The key to the trunk was in her bathrobe pocket!”

“Mom, let’s just ask her about it.”

“Oh honey, that wouldn’t work. When I first got the hospital last week after the accident, the doctor told me that he was more concerned about her dementia than her physical condition. Even the police officer said he thought she had dementia. That’s why we’re going to move her into our house and inventory everything in here.” After a pause, Sharon added with a frown, “But even if she didn’t have dementia, she still wouldn’t tell us anything.”

“Why not?”

“She wouldn’t want anyone to get the hint of a scandal. People would frown on that. And her grand *façade* would be shattered.”