

The Visitor Misses a Visit

Chapter One

Wariness from the Warehouse

Chicago, 2008

“What’s going on out there?” Connie Beatrice Wright set her computer case on the chair near her father’s desk.

He rounded the desk and gave her a brief kiss on her temple. “They finally sold that tire graveyard next door. Summer isn’t ever going to smell the same, thank the Lord.” “But the police?” What would they want with a tire dump?

His chin sagged as he moved back to his desk. “Are they still there?”

“Like ants.”

“As best I’ve learned, they uncovered something when the bulldozer started clearing out that huge pile of tires behind our warehouse.” He sat in his chair and propped his elbows on his desk. “Had a coroner car over there a bit ago.”

A coroner car? “Someone was dead?”

“I know that look, Connie. This is not a lark or a game.”

She ran her finger over the marble nameplate on the edge of his desk that read MacKenzie Wright. “A death is not a game, Daddy.” She knew what he was thinking by the grim set of his mouth. “I’m not doing a Nancy Drew thing.”

“It has nothing to do with us.”

Someone tapped at Dad’s almost-closed door. “Mr. Wright?” The warbly voice belonged to Mrs. Hodges, the long-time volunteer who worked as their receptionist most weekdays. “A policeman here to see you.” She nudged the door open a little wider.

“Come in, Officer.” Dad got up and met the man at the door.

But he wasn’t a simple police officer. That was clear. He wore a sport coat and khaki pants instead of a uniform.

“Detective Rainey, Mr. Wright.” The man opened a wallet with a card and shield inside. “You own this property and the warehouse behind it?”

“The foundation owns it. The warehouse is used to store the supplies we donate to the local shelters in the area.”

Dad had left out the many shelves that housed their various displays, decorations, and activities that they used to put on all of the fundraising events. Those shelves were cloaked with her mother’s dreams, brainstorming, and sheer imagination.

But that wouldn't interest Detective Rainey.

"I'm afraid we'll need to limit access to your warehouse until further notice."

"Why in the world—" Connie took one look at her dad's stern face and halted her comment.

"I understand, Detective." Her dad reached out his hand. "We'll certainly be praying that you can quickly figure out what happened to whoever you found."

The man shook Dad's hand. "As to that, have you heard of any strangers lurking around here? A man, maybe a few months ago?"

The man had been dead that long? Not that they would have noticed with the strong stink that already filled that side of the property from the tires. Connie's left eyebrow arched on its own before she caught herself and forced it even with the other.

"Not that I remember, but I'll ask around. Especially to the volunteers who help us in the warehouse."

The detective nodded and left without even glancing at Connie.

"Has anyone been lurking?" She leaned over with her hands flat on the desk when Dad took his seat again.

"You heard me tell the detective that I hadn't seen anyone."

"Uh-huh." Her father wouldn't lie about a thing like that, or about anything else for that matter, but Connie could smell a mystery in the making – or already made as the case may be.

"I think you should forget about all of that and go on to Mama's office. Your office." He gave a sad sort of smile, then stood and took one of her hands. "Your very first day as an employee of the Wright Foundation. We are so glad you agreed to come on board so quickly after finishing your business degree. Your mother's arthritis is advancing to the point that it is very difficult for her to type, or write, or even craft the decorations. I know handing the reins to you will relieve her mind a great deal."

Connie chuckled. "Well, after all, it is what I was raised to do, and I will love every minute!" She kissed Dad's cheek and then Mama stepped down the hall toward the reception center.

"Well, a proper good morning to you, Miss Connie, and congratulations on your graduation." Though trim, almost petite, Anna Hodges's vibrant smile and confident carriage made a formative statement. It was why she was chosen to be the first face and voice that prospective donors encountered. Wearing her signature red blouse and purple scarf, she set down her skinny latte and reached out as Connie crossed the main lobby.

"Thank you, Mrs. Hodges." She gave the frail woman a side-arm hug, then helped herself to a cup of coffee. "Have you seen my mom around?"

"In her office, my dear." She snapped her fingers and pointed up with a tilt of her head. "I mean your office." She gave Connie a wink.

"You have a blessed day, now." Mrs. Hodges waved to her as she turned to greet an entering

volunteer. The woman glowed pure joy.

Connie had always wanted to be just like her. She straightened the gray jacket over her short navy dress and slipped back down the executive hallway until she came into what had always been her mom's office. The name plaque on the door still read Eleanor Wright.

"Well, there you are, sweetie." Mama's lively voice cracked a bit. "I was afraid you got lost."

Connie smiled and shrugged. "Redirected by the police out there."

"I heard about that from Mrs. Hodges. Seems they found a body." Mama tsked and put a lid on top of a box. She eyed Connie. "Did you talk to your father?"

Connie stiffened and met her mom's stare. "About?" Had they changed their minds about letting Connie take her mom's place with the fundraising? "You're not having second thoughts?"

Mama shrugged. "I am, but then it doesn't matter really." She held up her crooked fingers. "I can't even tie shoelaces anymore. How am I supposed to decorate for banquets?" She flattened her mouth as tears filled her eyes.

"Mama, you know your own limitations, but that doesn't keep you from the brainstorming that you've always done to set up perfect events. You have a gift for matching the exact activity to the charity and the donors who will be the most interested in supporting it." It was uncanny.

Mama glanced to the carpet.

"Just because you can't hang drapery or organize all the details anymore doesn't mean you can't contribute, and in a big way." And Connie was counting on Mama's input.

Mama laid a blue-veined hand on Connie's. "Thank you, sweetie. That's more credit than some of your siblings would give me." She reopened the box and added a photo of their large family to it.

Connie didn't want to think about family right now. Of her seven siblings, only Paul and his wife Maggie, with their toddler Teagan, had attended her graduation on Saturday. Of course, Paul lived the closest and was the nearest in age to her. Though, since she had been an *oops* baby, ten years separated their births.

"I did talk to Dad, but not about anything in particular."

Her mom paused for a moment. "All right then."

"Shall I help you pack up your books?" She eyed the tall shelves filled with Mama's Bible studies, cookbooks, decorating manuals, and photo albums. Lots of photo albums full of every fundraising event the Wright Foundation had ever sponsored.

"Oh, no. I think you'll need all of those more than I will. I'm only moving over the bare minimum."

Hmm. Connie had hoped to move some of her own things in, but it looked like the office would still be Mama's even if the person behind the desk had changed.

Mama toted the small box to the open door and called out over her shoulder, “Oh, and Clint should be here soon.” She poked her head back around the corner with a cryptic smile. “Make sure you meet him.” She gave Connie a nod.

Connie painted on a benign smile. “Okay.”

Clint Rutherford. The golden boy by all accounts if Mama and Dad were to be believed. He’d only been around for a couple of months, yet they hung on the man’s every word.

Chapter Two

Impressions from the Golden Boy

The front door chimed and from Mrs. Hodges greeting, Connie wouldn't have to wait for very long to finally meet the fair-haired child. She stacked Mama's day planner and a few other journals on a side table and pulled her laptop from her backpack.

"Miss Wright, I presume."

Connie looked up into a beaming face. "You must be Mr. Rutherford." He didn't look all that golden. Didn't have a sparkle in his teeth or a shine to his blond hair, though he was on the handsome side with a clean-shaven, angular chin and piercing blue eyes.

"Call me Clint, please." He came around the desk. "I have so been looking forward to meeting you." He opened his arms wide and took a step closer.

A moment of indecision passed, but then Connie reached for his hand and pumped it several times hoping to match his cheerleader-like exuberance. "It's odd that we haven't met before now. But I hope you're feeling at home here." He hadn't been involved with the foundation that long, but with the busyness of her last year in school, she'd hardly visited at all.

He placed his hand over her own. "I sincerely feel as if I've found something of a home here at the Wright Foundation." His eyes got a little misty.

Well, he was nothing if not sincere. And it was nice of him to give them such a discounted rate to his work. Connie gave him a slight smile. "I understand that you're able to lend us a few hours per week?"

"Yes, yes." He released her hand. "I've done freelance work for a number of 501C3s. Though I still have a full-time position at ***. Must keep my nose to the grindstone as it were." He furrowed his eyebrows and shook his head like some type of cartoon character. "But this is where I want to be. If I had my choice, I would work here full time."

"Ah." Connie merely smiled. "Well, I'm sure Mama and Dad are both delighted to have you here. I'm certainly glad that I don't have to be the one to balance all the accounts." Thankfully, Diana Carson had a financial background and hadn't minded adding a little light bookkeeping to her volunteer hours.

Did she still do that or had Clint taken over the finances entirely? *Oh . . . financials . . .* She slipped past her chair to her backpack and pulled out the reimbursement form that she'd tucked in there. "I guess you should have this, then. It's for the storage unit for my furniture." She hated giving up her sweet little apartment, but the foundation only covered living expenses at the brownstone where her parents had lived all their married lives. Her suite on one side of the unit proved large enough for Connie to still feel like she lived on her own. Without the hassle of cooking or dishes.

Back to the business at hand. She held out the invoice. “If you’ll send the direct payment to my account, I’d appreciate it. It took years to get Dad to stop using checks. I don’t want him to go back to doing it that way.” She chuckled, and Clint joined her, taking the paper from her.

He glanced at it. “We’re actually doing reimbursements a little differently. I’ll have to make sure this purchase falls into accord with the new program.”

“A new program?” Sort of changing rules mid-game. “With no notice.”

He shrugged. “Your father asked me to do whatever necessary to keep the foundation working. This is part of my number one goal. But don’t worry. I’m sure something can be done for you if the charges don’t clear.” He squeezed his lips together for a moment and turned the sides up in a slim smile. “I’m not here to make waves.”

Connie attempted to duplicate his puckered gesture, but more than likely she only wrinkled her nose in his direction.

For someone not wanting to make waves, he sure did seem to be stirring the waters. “Well, it was wonderful to finally meet you.” She nodded and moved back to her desk, pulling out her computer cords. “And I’m sure we’ll be talking soon. I’m working out the details to support a pregnancy center. As soon as I unearth the files, I’ll send them to you.”

His smile faltered a bit. “Of course. I’d be happy to look into it.” He gave her a nod. “I’ll let you get back to it then.”

She frowned at the doorway that he’d just vacated. He’d look into it? What did he mean by that? She only needed Dad’s approval, and since Aunt Fanny sent her the information about this program, he’d certainly go for it.

Unless this Clint Rutherford held more sway over her parents than she knew.



Between moving all of her worldly belongings either into storage or back to the brownstone where her family had lived all of her life and jumping flat out into the middle of three fiendishly clever events that her mom had been planning, Connie barely saw her parents for the next few of days. But she caught her dad just before bed one evening in the family room. “Any more news from that detective?”

He gave her a side long look over the edge of his newspaper. “Are we borrowing trouble?”

“Just a simple question. I haven’t heard anything. I thought maybe you had.” She adjusted her denim shorts and drew her feet into the comfy chair seat with her, resting her chin on her knees.

He turned the page of his newspaper. “There was a small article about the death.”

“Murder.”

He glanced at her again, moving nothing but his eyes. “They aren’t calling it murder. Suspicious death at the very most.” Again he gave the financial section his attention. “They’ve given us access to our warehouse again.”

Connie hadn’t even been aware of that much. “Do they know who the man was?”

“Some poor vagrant trying to make a home on the docks, likely.” He gave a slight shrug. “There’s nothing you can do for him now, my dear.”

True. As much as she’d loved reading the mysteries of the titian-haired detective when she was growing up, she didn’t have the observation skills to solve any crime like Nancy Drew. Especially not something as critical as murder. *Um, make that a suspicious death.*

She leaned against the arm of the wingback and focused on her dad’s face as he sat in the recliner. “So, what about the pregnancy center? The project is really important to Aunt Fanny.”

“Yes, yes. But Aunt Fanny has important projects come up all the time.”

Not like this one, but Connie wouldn’t interrupt his thoughts.

“I’ve left this in Clint’s hands. He’ll do whatever’s right.”

Clint’s hands? “Daddy, you hardly know him. Are you really willing to give the man that much authority?” She straightened. “He’s the one making the foundation decisions now?”

“There’s more to it than that, Sweetheart.” He closed his newspaper as he rose from his chair. “I’ll consider the matter.” He folded the paper and tucked it under his arm. “That’s the best I can tell you right now.”

Dad’s *best* tied a knot in Connie’s stomach that wouldn’t go away. Perhaps a call to Aunt Fanny was in order tomorrow morning?

Chapter Three

Advice from a Boomer

Introducing Polly from Book 1 by Julie B Cosgrove

Fanny Lee Gillespie Henderson sat in the sunroom of her mansion sipping her second cup of coffee. Her housekeeper and cook, Izzy, brought the cordless phone to.

“Eets your niece Mees Connie.” Izzy whispered as she handed the call over. “She is the one who just graduated, sí?”

Fanny nodded. Then she punched the button and put the receiver to her ear. “Is that my favorite niece calling?”

“Hi, Aunt Fanny.”

“Congratulations, my dear. Graduated Cum Laude with honors. Not a small achievement. But I knew in my heart you would succeed, and I know you will, now, in your new position.”

“I got your amazing bouquet of star lilies. So kind of you to remember they are my favorite. I promise to write you a proper thank you note as soon as I settle in.”

Fanny chuckled. “I know you will, my dear. And I know it isn’t the horse you always wanted. Oh, how I recall the times you’d visit the family ranch here. You’d dash to the stables the moment the car stopped.”

“Snowball always seemed ready to greet me. I loved that horse.”

Fanny detected her niece’s voice crack with emotion. “He loved you as well.” Perhaps the stallion’s demise five years ago still stung. But horses were not meant to live forever.

“Aunt Fanny, I called to discuss the information you sent to Dad.”

Fanny took a sip of her coffee and set the cup down. “I see. Do you foresee any problems?”

“No, it’s not that . . . well . . . I need your advice.” Connie seemed a bit distracted. Not like her at all.

“Oh, what is it? You can always come to me, you know.”

“Which is why I called. Just a minute.”

Fanny heard a door softly close. “That’s better.” Connie’s voice lowered. “Have you heard about the new accountant, Clint Rutherford?”

“Your mother mentioned him in passing on the phone last week.”

Eleanor’s voice had sounded almost sing-songy.

“She seems to think he’s a Godsend.”

“I get the same feeling.”

And Fanny detected a flatness in Connie’s response. “From what your mom told me, he seems to be a gung-ho young man. Has a knack for numbers. And a steady churchgoer. That’s important. Why do you ask?”

She heard Connie suck in a deep breath. Had her sister's intuition been flawed? Fanny had learned to rely on it in the past. Sort of a Holy Spirit teleprompter. It had yet to steer her wrong in all the years that Eleanor and MacKenzie ran the foundation, which is why Fanny always agreed to help them find outlets for their funding.

"There is something about him. I don't know. His smile didn't seem genuine. It never reached his eyes. And they, well . . . dart about, as if he schemed what to say next. Like plotting the next move in a chess match."

"Oh?"

"It isn't tangible, just something I sensed. He seems to have taken on quite a lot of authority very quickly, though."

"Have you had much contact with him?"

Connie sighed, making a roar through the receiver. "I know that tone. Judge not lest ye be judged. Not only Jesus's warning in the Bible but your motto for life. Mine, too."

A pause lasted so long Fanny wondered if there had been an interruption in the connection. Then Connie's voice returned. "Frankly, we just met."

"Aw, well then perhaps you need to wait before you decide about his motives. Your parents talk well of him. And he is only a few years older than you. Maybe you sense your mother playing cupid and are a bit defensive?"

"Perhaps. I must admit Mama's facial expression when she mentioned him sent prickles up my arm, like the times she suddenly announced a visitor to dinner who happened to be close in age when I came home from college for a visit."

Fanny laughed. "She can't help being a mother, dear."

"True. And you may have a point. Still . . ."

"Tell me about your conversation, Connie. I sense this has stuck in your craw."

She did. Fanny remained quiet as she spoke. Being a successful businesswoman herself, she had long ago learned that good listening skills were key to an acute insight into people. If Connie's initial impression was off, Fanny would detect it.

When Connie finished, Fanny took another long sip of her now tepid coffee. She peered out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the garden. If only all people could be pruned like flowers and bushes to grow right. Oh, well. Her niece had been well-groomed for this position. She needed to consider her intuition as valid. However, like her new dahlia shrubs, Connie was still growing and might need some bolstering to blossom in the right direction.

"Sounds as if perhaps the young man may be a tad over enthusiastic. As you may be as well, my child. If anyone can rein him in, it is your father."

"I suppose."

"I would suggest you keep an open mind over the next few weeks . . ."

Connie's scoff came through the line.

"You don't sound convinced."

"It is just a gut instinct, I guess. But you are absolutely correct. I shouldn't jump the gun."

Fanny applied a serious tone to her voice as she leaned forward in her armchair. "Look, Connie. You are a smart young woman. You have your father's knack for business and your mother's heart for charities. I think God put you on earth when He did for a reason. You, above all your other siblings, have the talent and skill to carry on this foundation. Your parents are not getting younger you know. Someday it will all land in your lap, not just the fundraising part."

Silence. Had Fanny been too harsh? In her sixties, she could see the end of the line more clearly. Connie? At twenty-three, the world remained her oyster.

She tried again. "You have always had a good head on your shoulders, and if you sense something is amiss about this young man, perhaps you should discuss it with others that you can trust. Your siblings have all been involved in the foundation at one time or other. I think you should speak to them about it. If Clint is pulling any wool over your parents' eyes, your brothers and sisters should be made aware of it as well."

Connie let off what sounded like a nervous giggle. "I feel vindicated and taken to the woodshed all at the same time. You do make sense. I trust your insight, Aunt Fanny. Perhaps I need more evidence to validate my initial reaction."

"That's my girl."

"Thank you for your wisdom and your confidence in me. I appreciate your advice."

"Then accept one more, my dear. Don't let his nervousness or your own cloud your judgment. You are both getting your feet wet, as they say. However, you always were good at discerning people's motives. Make sure you're praying for God's leading. Then, if your gut, or shall we say the Holy Spirit, continues to send off warning signals, heed them."

"I will." Her voice lilted with warmth. "And again, thank you for the flowers. They are lovely."

"Goodbye my dear. You are in my prayers, but I know you will do just fine. Give your parents my love, and I look forward to hearing more about your plans for the pregnancy center fundraiser."

Fanny hung up and tapped the phone to her chin. When she'd been talking with Eleanor the other day, she'd heard a man's voice in the background. Had that been this new man? He'd spoken to Anna Hodges in a rather authoritative tone. Not a respectful one that a long-term volunteer like Anna, who knew the ropes, should command.

Well, he was young as well. If it was him at all. Youth tended to be impulsive. If Clint Rutherford had any ulterior aspirations Connie would get to the bottom of things. Yes, she would.



Aunt Fanny's advice stirred Connie.

As hurt as she was that most of her siblings had ignored her college graduation—high school graduation too, for that matter—she really did need to reach out to them. Family had always been so important to her, probably because, being so much younger, she'd been a little uninvited by most of them. Even Paul had the childhood memories of a full house, family trips in a full van, and holidays around a full table that she never had.

For the most part, she got along with her siblings, but maybe she should reach out first to the ones she didn't relate to as well, in order to get a more objective spin.

She needed to pray about it, but either Margaret or Kimberly needed to be her first call. Come to think of it, Margaret wouldn't likely speak to her at all. Connie had only seen her oldest sister a handful of times as she was growing up. The woman didn't seem the least bit interested in Connie.

Kimberly it would be, then.

Chapter Four

Opinions from Sib #6

Introducing Kimberly from Book 3 by Lill Kohler

Kimberly McConil plated the juicy pot roast on the gold rimmed floral platter, pleased the carrots, onions and potatoes slid into place without spilling over the edge. A deep whiff confirmed she had remembered to add all the seasonings. She poured the thickened broth into her grandmother's gravy bowl.

Giggles from the upstairs loft area signaled that Phil managed to distract the twins from their video game Cars Mater-National Championship. She smiled and sighed. *Ah, this is the life.* But she was still on a time crunch.

One last review of the table reminded her she forgot the applesauce. Once she poured that into her newly acquired antique crystal etched bowl, she placed it next to the meat and vegetables at the center of the table.

"Phil, kids, dinner's ready." She grabbed the butter for the rolls and the serving utensils then called again.

The giggling grew in volume. "No, Daddy, not like that."

"Hmm." She made her way upstairs in time to see the three of them fixated on the TV screen.

"Excuse me." She raised her voice enough to get over the squeals.

None of them turned or stopped.

Heat rose in her cheeks. Her meal would not taste good if it was cold. She walked in front of the screen.

"Mom." The twins echoed.

She cleared her throat as she mentally counted to ten. "I called for you guys. Dinner is ready. And it's getting cold."

"Oh, honey. I'm sure it'll be fine." Phil cocked his head toward the twins.

She threw him her famous *if-looks-could-kill* stare. He smirked and then swirled his finger in a circular motion. "Come on, wrap it up. You heard your mom. Dinner's ready."

Five minutes later they were finally settled at the table. They joined hands and blessed their meal. Phil leaned over and gave her his traditional peck. And with that she forgave his delay.

Lori had barely finished buttering her bread in the time it took her twin, Cory, to devour half of the large portions he served himself. "Slow down Cory. You'll get indigestion." Lori reprimanded her brother.

"Indigestion, sweetness." Phil corrected. "How was school today kids?"

Cory immediately replayed the soccer game highlights and the almost fight in the cafeteria.

He did manage to share some of the day's history and science lessons.

Lori began her stories as soon as Cory took a breath. She focused on what each of her friends wore to school and what they all ate for lunch. She took a few more bites. "Oh, I almost forgot. Aunt Connie called."

"That's who you were on the phone with?" Cory slammed his fork on the table. "Why didn't you tell me? I want to talk to her too. She knows things." His brows lifted and eyes twinkled.

Kimberly almost dropped her fork into her lap. A quick glance at Phil revealed he hadn't missed her reaction. She painted on a perfectly composed expression. "Oh? When was that?"

"When you ran to the store after we got home." Lori licked the applesauce off her spoon. "She is so cool. We talked a long time. She even helped me with my math homework."

"How long were you gone, sweetheart?" Phil's right eyebrow was cocked.

She waved it off. "Not long, but the store was more crowded than I expected." She refocused on Lori. "So, did she say why she called?" Kimberly hadn't left her youngest sibling a message or anything. Never mind that their relationship was more strained than most sisters experienced.

"Ah. No." Lori tilted her head to the right. "She just said to tell you to call her."

Great. "Well, thank you sweetheart." Kimberly gently placed her fork on her near-empty plate then rubbed her hands on her pant legs.

Kimberly passed the rest of the meal in a fog. Her sister never called her about anything. Good or bad. They rarely spoke.

The twins asked to be excused to finish their homework and then dashed upstairs.

"I need to take a little walk." She told Phil as she cleared the table. "Can you get the kids ready for bed tonight?"

"Sure." He rose and pushed his chair in.

She stood on tiptoes and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

He pulled out a towel and began to dry. "By the way, that yellow bowl you used tonight . . ."

Oh, he noticed. She wanted to jump for joy.

"It's new, isn't it?"

"Yes." She smiled. "It's an antique."

"How much?"

Her stomach roiled. "Only fifty dollars."

Phil stumbled back. "Ah, sweetheart. Did you get this at an authorized antique dealer?"

"Oh, my, no." Her hair bounced on her cheeks as she shook her head. "It would have cost so much more. I found it at the arts and crafts mall. There's a sweet old man who sells antiques from time to time. He said it was crystal."

"Ah." Phil covered his face with the towel then looked at her again. "Honey, my grandma

Josephine had one like that. Unfortunately, I accidentally broke it when I was twelve.”

Kimberly’s stomach flipped as she felt blood drain from her face.

“She bought it at the local five and dime store. It had St. Martin stamped on the bottom of it.”

“What are you saying?”

“Did you check the bottom for a stamped name?”

“Ah, no.”

Her throat tightened as she pulled the bowl out of the drying rack. Like a spotlight beam the glaring words St. Martin stood out. “So, it’s not crystal?”

“It was a poor man’s crystal. They managed to make a thin glass that made purchasers feel wealthy.”

She felt light-headed. Her hands clung to the bowl with white knuckles to fight the destructive urge to throw it onto the floor and shatter it.

“Tell you what.” Phil took the bowl from her and placed it in their china cabinet. “It’ll be our little secret. But don’t brag on your find. Sound good?”

She bobbed her head, but she felt like an idiot. Just another poorly made financial decision. When would she ever learn?

His eyes roamed her face. “You all right?”

“Just need time to gather my thoughts before I call her.”

“Connie?”

“Yes.” She shook her head. “I need to walk and pray.”

Kimberly stepped out onto their back deck then down the incline past their pool. She was thankful for the small patch of woods that backed up to the neighborhood green belt. Walking among God’s creation helped her clear her mind.

If baby sister hadn’t called before, even those times when Mama and Dad told her that Connie might call, why now?

The last time she spoke with her parents, they were excited her sister was going to join them at the Wright Foundation. Kimberly had always wanted to be asked to come alongside them, but they never proposed that. Maybe Connie wasn’t going to join them. Maybe she needed advice on how to tell them.

Then again Connie never asked Kimberly for advice.

Maybe something was wrong with Mama and Dad. That would explain why she didn’t tell Lori anything.

Fear spurred her on as she did an about-face to traverse the manicured wood trail back to her home.

She found her husband in the exercise room. Kimberly sat on the edge of Phil’s workout

bench as he wiped the sweat off his forehead. “Connie never calls me. I’m really starting to worry.”

“Tell you what. Let’s call her together. We’ll make it a conference call. I’ll see if I can read between the lines. See if she’s saying something without coming right out and speaking the words.”

“Yes. Let’s do that.” She nestled her head against his shoulder.

“Sounds good.” Phil gave the top of her head a peck then stood. “Do you think it’s too late to call now?”

“Should be alright. It’s not that late.” Her stomach fluttered.

Phil’s warm sweaty hand grabbed her shaky fingers as he led her to the house phone. “I’ll get on the extension in the bedroom.”

With a deep breath, Kimberly dialed the number of her sister’s fancy cellular phone.

Connie answered on the third ring. “Hey there.”

Sure didn’t sound like an emergency. “Lori told me that you called. Phil is on the line, with us.”

“Hi Connie.” His voice encouraged Kimberly.

She wasn’t in this alone. Whatever this was. “Are Mama and Dad okay?”

“They’re fine. Hold on a sec.” Kimberly heard the closing of a door through the phone. “Okay. I’m walking alone now.”

“Why don’t you want Mama and Dad to hear you?” Maybe there was something wrong, even with her sister’s light tone.

“I’m having trouble trusting their new accountant. Dad keeps putting me off, telling me that this other guy is doing exactly what Dad wants. But the man gives me vague answers like, ‘I’m looking into it.’”

“Why don’t you tell us your concerns.” Phil piped in.

After several minutes of Connie’s descriptions and replaying of conversations the line went quiet.

“Well, I think he’s fine.” Kimberly’s mind stopped focusing on Connie’s concerns shortly after she started. She’d met the man, and as far as she was concerned, he passed her tests. “The man’s handsome and always dressed in the latest style. He looks you straight in the eyes when he speaks to you. Someone who’s lying to you, or deceiving you, wouldn’t do that.”

“I wish that were true, sweetheart.” Phil’s voice sounded calm, but the slight condemnation undertone increased her heart rate.

Her face warmed. “But he always seems to be upfront whenever I asked him questions. Seems like an open book type of person.” She rubbed her forehead. “You know someone you can trust.”

Phil gave something between a hum and a growl. “Connie, I believe your mom and dad did a background check when he first applied, or they wouldn’t have trusted him. That being said, I think you have legit reasons for a second independent check done on the man.” Phil’s words were totally opposite of what she told Connie.

She wanted to scream.

Connie spoke up before Kimberly could open her mouth. “Phil, thank you. I have an investigative reporter friend. I’ll see if she can do a little digging. Maybe call his previous employers to get a better idea about him.”

“But . . .” Kimberly still felt the man was innocent.

“Thank you both. I’m home now, so I’ve got to go. Love you guys.” She clicked off.

Heat burned in Kimberly’s face as she laid the receiver in the cradle. Once again, her opinion didn’t seem to weigh much in Connie’s eyes.

She heard Phil call her name from the top of the stairs. She turned on the water in the sink and splashed some on her face as his shoes clicked on the foyer’s tile floor.

He stopped in the kitchen entry. “I know you disagree with me Kimberly.” Phil reached for her. “But if she feels in her gut something’s wrong then she needs to check it out.” He lifted her wet chin, so her face was in his line of vision. “If she’s wrong, then you’ll know you were right.”

Kimberly smiled and bounced her head. This man sure had a way of making the sun shine on a gloomy moment.

Thank you, God.

Chapter Five

Murder from a Friend

Connie took Phil's advice and contacted one of her former roommates right away.

Gretchen had majored in journalism, and she doggedly pursued a job as an investigative reporter. Though she only had an entry-level position, her job at the Tribune connected her with all types of information retrieval systems.

Thankfully, she wasn't too busy to dig into Clint Rutherford's past. "I'll give it a shot. And I heard you had some excitement out there the other day."

Her graduation hadn't really been all that exciting. "It wasn't that big a deal."

"I think murder is a big deal."

Oh, she was talking about the dead man. *Wait*. "Did you say murder?" She'd been right all along?

"Sure thing. The report I got said he was shot three times at fairly close range with a small caliber pistol."

"I can't imagine . . ." How come no one heard gunshots?

Gretchen scoffed. "That happens all the time in the city."

"I was more deducing than asking. It must have happened at night or on a weekend when none of the volunteers were here. It's close enough to the offices that, barring a hailstorm, anyone would have heard gunshots."

"So, nobody heard anything?" Gretchen clearly pressed for a story, but Connie had nothing to offer.

"No one's said anything. And I think, considering that the police were here for two solid days, they would have said something." Especially Mrs. Hodges. And she's at the foundation almost every day, right there by the front door.

"Well, I'll let you know what I hear. Right now, they're moving heaven and earth to try to identify the dead guy."

Connie could certainly sink her teeth into the mystery like Gretchen seemed to be doing, but she'd already promised Dad that she wouldn't do a Nancy Drew. "I want you to dig into the past of someone for me."

Okay, maybe she would do a little Nancy Drewing, but clearly her promise had no bearing here since the issue dealt with matters within the foundation itself.

Her friend hummed into the receiver. "Well, I'm between gigs as it were, so I can probably swing it. Who are you investigating? New boyfriend?"

Why did everyone always go directly to that assumption? "New accountant here at the foundation." She gave Gretchen his name. "I want all the deets."

“Is there a problem?” Possibility rang in Gretchen’s tone.

“This is strictly off the record, Gretchen. There isn’t a problem. I just want to know a little more about him. That’s all.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can get the worms to wiggle.”

Connie half-scoffed a chuckle. Hopefully, her friend wouldn’t find a can of worms at the bottom of this.

The thought kept niggling at her. She had a terrible time avoiding the discussion with her dad that evening.

Thankfully, he was focused on their upcoming trip to support a charity near her oldest sister’s home, “I know it’s been a while since you’ve seen Margaret?”

Connie hadn’t seen her since she’d been in high school, though even then her sister rarely spoke with her. “I’m so looking forward to meeting your namesake, Dad. I’ve spoken on the phone with Little Mac, and she is just adorable.”

“She is.” He gave her a sidelong look. “And she looks exactly like you. But you won’t be coming along this time.”

“What do you mean I’m not going with you?” Connie sounded like a five-year-old in her own ears, but she’d been looking forward to visiting with her sister’s family, even if her oldest sister didn’t usually acknowledge her. Forcing herself to take a deep breath, she laid her napkin in her lap.

“The money isn’t there right now.”

Connie glanced at Mama.

She served herself some potatoes, clearly not wanting to be part of this conversation.

Something was going on. First Aunt Fanny’s charity, and now this fundraising trip. “Dad, you’re going to need to explain this to me. You ask me to be the new head of fundraising, but you don’t let me go to the first scheduled event? That doesn’t even make sense.”

He lifted his chin. “There’s no need for you there. The group has plenty of volunteers. We’re only making it officially part of the Wright Foundation by making an appearance. The rest of the trip is meeting with financiers. Not part of your area of expertise.”

“And spending time with Margaret’s family?”

“You hardly know your oldest sister.”

She shut her eyes and took another breath. “Does this have something to do with the pregnancy center we talked about?”

He shook his head and held out his hand. “One thing at a time, Constance.”

She swallowed her ire at hearing her formal first name. Dad had only ever used it when she was in trouble. Hearing it as an adult didn’t fly but calling him on it wouldn’t help anything.

Still, if her father was going to treat her like a child, this job might not be such a great fit

after all. She lowered her tone. “It seems to me that this is all connected. Otherwise, why wouldn’t we take on the pregnancy center. It is exactly the type of charity we support. You know the people Aunt Fanny meets.”

“I just don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” All of her patience fled out the nearby window. After all, this was Aunt Fanny they were talking about. Not some idealistic group trying to do something they’d never heard of.

“Well to be honest.” Her father slathered some butter on a roll. “Clint’s been highly concerned about some of the extraneous expenses this year. A few of our best donors have drastically lowered their giving.”

What donors? And why was she only just hearing about this? “So, how will that affect the day-to-day business and our outreach?”

Her father locked eyes with her. “I’m afraid we might have to let some people down. I’m indebted to Clint for finding the problems. But I’m just not sure what to do about it all. It seems that this is going to end up being an extremely lean year even though we’re only just learning about it.”

Connie needed to talk to Clint Rutherford. “So, what unexpected expenditures have you had to deal with?” She took a bite of her mom’s roast beef and tried to focus on the analytical details that her father began discussing, but the emotion knotting the pit of her stomach made it hard to focus.

“We ended up buying essentials for six different shelters in the area instead of only the one we had pledged to support. I originally understood that we had the backing to cover all of that, but when Clint got here, he informed us that we did not indeed have that backing. Of course, that was just the tip of the iceberg.” Dad continued to explain other situations. Something to do with an unexpected roof replacement at one charity and a broken water heater at another.

The bottom line was, they were upside down in the financial department.

“Mind if I look into it a little?” Connie picked up her tea glass and gave her father an innocent look as she took a sip.

She needn’t have gone to the trouble of trying to look innocent. His eyes narrowed. “Now don’t go looking for mysteries and hooligans where there aren’t any.” His chiding voice was only a little on the gruff side.

She set her glass down and lifted her hands in surrender. “Only to get a better feel for what’s going on, so I know how I need to move ahead.”

“I’m sorry about the trip. I know you were looking forward to it.”

Shrugging, she took another bite of the roast. “I’ll miss finally meeting Mac, but I’d rather dig into this problem and see how I can help.”

More like uncover, learn, ferret out. It was all the same, but she couldn't really use any of those terms around her dad.

"I'm sure Clint can guide you in that."

"Guide me?" Didn't the man work for her?

"He knows what he's doing, dear. It would not be of help to anyone for you to come in and begin stirring up the muddy water that he's been able to settle." Her father picked up the last bite of his roll and ran it through his leftover gravy. "Besides, you have enough on your plate with the coming Louisville event. No sense wasting time duplicating someone else's job." His voice became crustier than normal.

"All right." She said it, but instantly knew she couldn't just turn around and pretend nothing was wrong.

He ate his final bite, pulled his napkin from his lap, and laid it on the table as he stood.

"Things will work out. They always do."

Dad had said that all her life. But he was wrong. *Things* didn't work out. People worked on them and the Lord worked them out. But things didn't just magically jump up and right themselves.

And she wasn't about to sit by and watch to see if some shoemaker's elves were planning to come solve their current problem.

Chapter Six

Encouragement from Sib #4

Introducing Polly from Book 2 by Fay Lamb

Polly Reagan glanced at the caller ID on her house phone as she rushed by. A local politician, asking for donations. She didn't have time. As it was, she needed to carve out a few moments to call her little sister.

Kimberly had mentioned in their conversation yesterday that Connie was insisting that something was not quite right with the new accountant her parents had hired for the foundation.

Polly pondered getting the story straight from the horse's mouth as it were. Now, though, she needed to get busy. Saturdays were always busy. Her four-year-old son, Ethan, had a group tennis lesson in less than fifteen minutes. Tennis was important to her kid, and even though he was the youngest in the group, she made it a priority.

Even so, she had an apology to make to Connie. She'd let her sister down. After years of being out of the law office, she still hadn't learned to schedule. She'd relied heavily upon her secretary to keep her free of conflicts. Her faux pas in agreeing to help with her nephew's birthday party on the same day as Connie's graduation had created not only a scheduling conflict but a very big personal conflict with Connie.

"Mama, we gotta go!" Ethan called from the door. "Dad's gonna leave us."

Polly laughed. Yes, Marc would do that. Being on time was an important lesson to teach their only son. "You have your racquets, water, your towel?"

"I got it all."

Of course, he did. At four, he was better at preparation than she had ever been. "Have. You have it all." She hurried behind him, closing and locking the door. The call to Connie would have to wait until Ethan settled into the lessons and stopped looking back at her.

A half-hour later, Polly gave Ethan a thumbs-up as the larger than usual red ball used for his age's tennis lessons sailed over the net, showing off her son's excellent backhand. At four, the kid showed promise.

She cast a glance to Marc. Her husband's face showed his intent interest in the lesson.

Ethan stood in the line with his friends and chatted.

Now was her chance. Polly pulled out her mobile phone and dialed Connie.

"Hey," Connie answered after the first ring. "I almost didn't answer. Have you ever called me on your mobile phone?"

"Ha. Ha. I don't like talking on these things."

"You do know that people are getting rid of house phones, right? Who uses a house phone these days?"

“I do.” Polly smiled at her sister’s teasing. “Listen, I owe you an apology for not attending graduation. I had already agreed to help with our nephew Jimmy’s birthday party. He holds a special place in my husband’s heart. Not that you don’t . . .”

“You aren’t the only one who didn’t attend.” Connie’s words fell soft with a sense of disappointment.

“Connie, I’m sorry, and I don’t have an excuse.

“You’re forgiven.”

“Kimberly called me.” Polly put the truth out there.

“Figured she would. Did she tell you what she thinks is going on or did she tell you what I said is going on?”

The kids on the court began a new game. Ethan took his place at the shortened service line. Polly held her breath, hoping he wouldn’t look to see she wasn’t being an attentive mom. “This is Kimberly we’re talking about.”

Polly somewhat agreed with Kimberly about giving Connie the responsibility of fundraising for the foundation, but Mama and Dad had the right to do just that. Besides, Polly felt that Connie had to be given room to prove herself—not something the entire family agreed upon. Especially Kim. “What’s going on?”

“I’m really uncomfortable with the accountant Dad hired.”

Kimberly had said as much. “What do you mean when you say uncomfortable?”

“Call it a *spidey* sense.”

“So, tell me what exactly raised your antenna?”

“My very first conversation with him was off. I don’t know how to explain it. All the sudden, Dad says Clint has decided we don’t even have money to work a fundraiser for one of Aunt Fanny’s causes that I want to champion. Mama and Dad shut me down when I tried to tell them my concerns. Polly, what should I do?”

Mama and Dad had always been too trusting. So far, their trust had not been betrayed. Connie was wet behind the ears, but she wasn’t one to cast dispersion without reason. Even when she’d tattled on her older siblings, she’d always had truth on her side. Connie sounded truly worried. Polly sensed there might be some truth to her youngest sister’s reaction. “What do you mean they shut you down?”

“They don’t seem inclined to believe me. Kimberly dismissed my fears. Apparently, if a man dresses well, looks you in the eyes, and says all the right things, he’s to be believed. Though Phil took my side.”

Polly would have laughed with a description that fit Kimberly to a T, except Connie seemed sincere—and that caused worry to wedge into Polly’s heart.

Still, this was a learning opportunity. “First of all, you’re doing a great job.”

Connie's exhale of breath did not go unnoticed. "You—you really think so. Kimberly disagreed with everything I said."

"Kiddo, Kimberly cares about you, but she's hurting. She wanted the folks to ask her to help. They chose you. Not your fault. I'm trusting you to do what needs to be done so far as your responsibilities for the foundation and the family."

"That's just it, Polly. I don't know what to do."

"Come on. You've already taken steps. You're following your instincts, and you've reached out to others. Keep pressing forward."

"And what about the foundation's reputation? How do I protect it if what I suspect is true?"

Polly remained silent for a long moment, trying to think of the right words for her sister.

"You still there?" Connie's voice softened.

"Yes. I was thinking of how to put this. Dad would never purposely let the foundation fail. Follow his lead, but continue to follow your instinct, and keep him apprised of things you learn even if he balks at you."

"Okay . . ."

"And if Dad drops the ball despite your best efforts, it will be on him. He's the head of not only the non-profit, but also our family. That means the responsibility to protect the family and the foundation is his until he passes it on. Your only duty in that regard is to alert him of possible troubles. What he does with that information belongs to him."

Connie whistled. "Thank you for that. I've been carrying this weight on me, but you're right. And thank you for believing in me."

The *twacking* of balls hitting the court reminded Polly that she was missing Ethan's lesson. "Whatever you decide, I'm with you."

"Thanks for that, too."

"Unless you do something stupid. If you do something stupid to make Dad mad, I'm outta here."

Connie laughed, a good sound to hear. "I don't do stupid."

"Yeah, you do. You just get away with it better than the rest of us." And Connie, the baby, had often been the one who called her siblings' stupidity to the attention of their parents. "Call me and let me know what you learn."

"I will. Thanks, again, and I love you."

"You're welcome and back at you." Polly hung up and stepped back to stand behind her husband.

Ethan, his fingers wrapped around the racquet's handle, swung with all his might, hitting the large red ball over the net and past his older opponent. Her kid had a winning forehand to complement that excellent backhand.

Marc stood and stretched. “That’s our boy. He’s got the skillset to do well.”

Polly nodded. She prayed her little sister had her own skillsets to get through this difficult situation. The foundation, and her family’s reputation, were at stake.



It had felt good to chat with Polly. She and her sister didn’t always see eye to eye, but Connie respected her judgment.

And the fact that she thought Connie was in the right place and doing well warmed her heart.

Still, going behind Dad’s back was not something she was accustomed to doing. She picked up her purse and strolled toward Mrs. Hodge’s counter. “I think I’ll go for a sandwich. Would you like for me to bring you something?”

The woman wrinkled her nose and shook her head lightly, but then she smiled. “You’ve been mighty busy, my dear. And you look a little worried. Is there something I can help you with?”

Connie shrugged. “I’m a little confused with the changes that I’m seeing.”

“Ah, yes. There have been some changes indeed, but I think they will be good ones in the long run.”

“You think so?”

The woman nodded and got a serious look in her eyes. “Take the reimbursement process we’ve always had. Anyone involved with the foundation simply turned in a slip with an amount on it. It didn’t even have to be itemized. Diana would cut a check for them the next time she was in office—no questions asked.”

It certainly wasn’t a good business practice, but the volunteers here were like family. Or was that naïve of her to think so? “You don’t think anyone has taken advantage of that do you?”

“Not on purpose. But yes, I’ve heard of folks rounding up and giving *about* amounts. Your dad had wanted to require itemized receipts, but Eleanor talked him out of it. And in truth, the people that purchase for the events find things all over, from places where formal receipts just aren’t available, you know.”

Mama’s crew had a special talent for finding the most amazing and unique items. Hopefully, they would do that for Connie as well.

The door chimed and Diana Carson herself waddled in on her cane. Diana had been the volunteer at the foundation who took care of most of the administrative items. Including the bookkeeping when it was needed. She’d been there almost as long as Mrs. Hodges had been working the front desk. “Is there any word about the murder yet?” She leaned over on the

counter that was almost too tall for her. “I don’t mind telling you that it has me all a-shiver. Someone buying it like that. And right out there, not thirty yards away. There’s someone up to no good.”

“There’s very little information, even in the papers.” Mrs. Hodges lifted a folded newspaper to the counter. “You’re welcome to look, dear.”

“Thank you.” The woman picked up the day’s edition.

Connie hung onto the other subject, though. Not that the crime behind their building wasn’t intriguing, but the issues at hand tended to affect them even more. “We were discussing the reimbursement policy that Clint Rutherford has put together.”

The woman scowled. “I think it’s completely unfair of Mr. Rutherford to treat the volunteers like that.”

“So he is requiring receipts, then?”

She nodded, “More than that, he has some sort of list of what items will be reimbursed and what sorts of things won’t.”

Like the storage fees for Connie’s furniture.

“No one knows what an acceptable purchase is until they bring it to him. And if he says no.” She waved her thumb away from her as she blew a raspberry.

Mrs. Hodge’s mouth puckered as though she suppressed a laugh. And on most days, Diana Carson could make Connie chuckle with her direct manner and her no-nonsense style. But her concerns about Clint Rutherford weren’t a laughing matter. And while Connie had no evidence of anything out of sorts about him, she had a bad feeling about all of this.

Maybe her next call could give her an idea of the next step she should take.

Chapter Seven

Avoidance from Sib #5

Introducing Eva Grace from book 6 by Betty Thomason Owens

“Oh, good heavens.” Eva Grace clicked the off button on her cell phone as her husband entered the room.

Jim sat on the stool at the foot of the bed and untied his shoes. “Who’s calling so late?”

“Kimberly.” Eva Grace puffed out a sigh.

“Your sister?” Jim rose and stepped toward the closet. “I’m listening.”

“Connie called her, all upset about the foundation.”

Jim turned back and stood in the doorway a moment, looking at her. “Connie? Didn’t she just graduate from college?”

“She’s back home now and snooping around. She thinks something is off with the books.” Eva Grace rearranged the blankets. “As if Mama and Dad would ever let that happen.”

Jim disappeared again.

Running water told Eva Grace he had started his nightly routine. She picked up her abandoned novel and turned a page, but it didn’t hold her attention. “Kimberly said Connie doesn’t like the new accountant. She told Kimberly he was snooty. Or was it snotty?”

Jim shut off the water. “You don’t think she’s right about the books, then?”

“Of course not, and neither does Kimberly. I think she’s just being a brat again. She asked for something. The accountant refused. That rankled her.”

Jim flipped the light switch and headed for his side of the bed. “Well, it’ll all iron out. Could be a misunderstanding. But, if Connie has concerns, I’ll be happy to talk to her. Why don’t you call her in the morning—find out for yourself what’s going on.”

Eva Grace curled her lip in mock disgust. “Maybe I will.” After she talked to Mama and Dad. And maybe Polly.

Jim leaned in for a goodnight kiss. “You should. Now, let it go and get a good night’s sleep. Sweet dreams, hon.”

Eva Grace glowered at his sleeping form. How did he do that? After another failed attempt to concentrate on the novel, she closed it, laid the book on the bedside table, and then turned off the lamp. She settled in and stared at the ceiling. Ugh. Why did Kimberly have to call tonight? It wasn’t that important—it could have waited until morning.



Jim's alarm beeped. Five-thirty. Eva Grace's eyelids creaked open. She dragged her sluggish body out of bed, slipped her toes into her fluffy, pink mules, and shrugged into her housecoat. As she headed down the stairs, the coffee maker gave a final sputter. Thank you, Lord, for automatic coffeemakers.

By the time her husband joined her in the kitchen, Eva Grace had his breakfast ready and his newspaper waiting. Two eggs over easy, three links of maple-flavored sausage, and a slice of buttered toast. The usual.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Good morning, sweetheart. Thanks for breakfast."

While he ate and read, she watered her houseplants and mentally planned her day. Call Mama and Dad. Or maybe she should call Polly first. She bent over an African violet, testing the soil. She straightened and glanced out the window. Maybe she wouldn't call anyone.

That settled, she returned to the kitchen in time to wish Jim a good day before he left for work. On the way out the door, he paused. "Don't forget to call Connie. Tell her I'll be happy to talk to her if she needs advice."

Right. She smiled and nodded. "Sure." Now, she felt obligated. But Chicago was on the central time zone, so she had at least an hour or so before making the call. Happy thought. Throughout the morning, she procrastinated, pushing aside pangs of conscience as she struggled to get Samantha dressed and ready for her riding lesson. They were halfway to Briarbeck Farm when her phone buzzed.

Samantha raised her head from the book she'd been devouring for the last two days. "Mom, your phone's ringing."

"It will keep. I'm driving."

She reached inside my purse. "Oh, hey, it's Aunt Polly. Want me to answer it?"

"No, I don't—" she sucked in a breath as her daughter grinned and punched the green button. "Samantha Jean Carr," she hissed at her daughter.

"Hi, Aunt Polly. How are you?"

Dear Lord, give me strength. Biting back angry words, Eva Grace pulled into the drive at the horse farm and did her best not to floor it, scatter gravel, and frighten horses.

Samantha clicked her seatbelt open. "I'm fine. Having a horse-riding lesson. Here's Mom." Samantha held the phone out with a final grin before leaving the vehicle.

After a deep, cleansing breath, Eva Grace put the phone to her ear. "Good morning, Polly, dear."

"Do I detect a note of sarcasm? Have I caught you before coffee?"

"Hahaha. Aren't you funny. I suppose you've heard from Kimberly?"

Polly exhaled. "Yes, so I called Connie. Not that I don't trust Kimberly, but you know how emotional she gets. Anyway, Connie thinks the new accountant, Clint Rutherford, has something

shady going on. Can you believe that?”

“Embezzlement?”

“She didn’t actually use the word, but it had all the earmarks.”

Eva Grace shook her head. “I have difficulty believing anyone could put something over on Mama and Dad.” Both were astute in business. They had built the Wright Foundation from the ground up.

“Eva, you know how tired they are. It is possible something is going on.”

“Well, Jim said he’ll talk to Connie. Maybe he can help.” Her stomach cramped at the thought. She loved her baby sister, but Connie could be such a . . .

“Mama!”

She looked up as Samantha jogged her way.

“Gotta go, Polly. Samantha needs me.”

A reprieve. Eva Grace did not want to think anymore about the Wright Foundation or what’s-his-name who may or may not have pilfered money.



Connie’s call came just after Jim walked in after work that evening. Eva Grace had expected the call but had half-hoped it wouldn’t happen. And she barely had time to exchange niceties with her sister when Jim joined her in the kitchen.

“Oh, Connie, here’s Jim. Why don’t you tell him what’s going on?”

Before her sister had a chance to respond, Eva Grace passed the phone to her husband.

He switched it to intercom. “Hello, Connie, you’re on speaker so we can keep your sister in the loop. What’s this I hear about funds missing?”

“Hello, Jim. Great to hear your voice. No missing funds, as far as I know. Clint Rutherford is being high-handed, like he owns the place.”

Eva Grace’s nerves twisted into a bunch. She walked into the Florida room and looked out the window as Connie’s voice droned on.

“I confess, Jim, I told Dad I would keep my nose out of it, but at the very least I can look at the accounts, right?”

Jim stepped through the doorway. “I would, starting with the bank accounts. Your dad is set up on that new online banking program, isn’t he?”

“Yes, I have a password for it myself.”

Jim smiled. “Then, that’s your next step. Do that, and if anything looks off with the bank accounts, find a good outside accounting firm to do the external audit. If you find funds missing or even mis-appropriated, you’ll need a forensic audit.”

“Oh, Jim, thank you so much.”

“Keep me posted, Connie. We’ll be praying—and hey—congratulations on your graduation.”

“Aww, thank you and thanks so much for the prayers. You know I’ll need those. Give Samantha a big hug and kiss from me.”

“I’ll do that.” He ended the call and smiled at Eva Grace. “Well, let’s hope no money is missing. That would be the best-case scenario.” He held out his hand to Eva Grace. “I told her we’d pray. No time like the present.”



Why hadn’t Connie gotten on to the fancy website right away?

The next morning, as soon as she’d taken Mama and Dad to the airport for their flight to the event Mama had planned, she made a beeline back to the foundation. Maybe she could catch Clint in his office.

After greeting Mrs. Hodges, this time wearing a purple pant suit with a red bolero belt, Connie made her way to her office and booted her computer.

She stared at the little circle going round and round and reflected on her favorite receptionist.

Maybe Connie needed to adjust her wardrobe a little. All of her business clothes were bland—browns and grays with a few dark blues thrown in. She didn’t own anything red, though she always liked the color.

In fact, she really liked that color. And Mrs. Hodges always made a statement with it.

She sat at her desk and opened the link to their bank, then clicked in the details of her username and password. The notice that she’d used an incorrect password appeared. “For pity’s sake.” She sighed and typed in the details again. This time one key at a time.

Still wrong.

What was up with this? She checked her tab lock and then typed in the password again only to see the error message once more. Had Dad changed the passwords? Probably a good idea, but she needed access. Why wouldn’t he have told her?

Giving in, she put in her email address to request a password update. She’d be sure to let her mom and dad know that they had accidentally locked her out. And she would be thoughtful enough to share the new password with them.

Another error message popped up. Her email address wasn’t associated with an account? Since when?

Connie trotted into Dad’s office and opened her dad’s computer. She clicked through the

protection and pulled up the bank website. As she expected, her dad's username and password were already on the login page. She clicked the submit link and received the same error she'd gotten on her own machine.

Something was dreadfully wrong. She checked the password list on her dad's computer. The password was exactly as she remembered it. But it still didn't work. And when she tried to change the password, her father's email address registered as unknown, too.

Now what?

And where was Clint?

Chapter Eight

Passion from Sib #3

by Marji Laine

Her phone rang and she glanced at the number. “Oh, Peter. You’re timing is perfect as usual.” She made her way back to her office and shut the door behind her.

“And how is my favorite baby sister?” The man’s fifty years and hard living in the dry environment near the Sahara left his voice crackling.

“Frustrated.” Peter didn’t really have much to do with the foundation, but being a widower, he’d taken as active a part in the family as possible, calling her every week without fail. “The foundation is having some financial trouble, apparently.”

“Apparently?”

“I can’t see the bank accounts to check them.” She told him about what Dad had said and about her failed efforts on the computer. “But he and Mama are at an event so I don’t want to bother them.”

“What about that new man?” Peter must have spoken to Mama or Dad about Clint.

“He only volunteers here. I don’t have any way to contact him, and I haven’t seen him for a few days.”

“Oh that is frustrating. Things are still running like normal?” Of course her big brother would focus on the facts.”

“I guess so.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “Yes. I’m just making snakes out of spaghetti, aren’t I?”

Her brother chuckled through the line. “Now I didn’t say that. If you are concerned then there’s reason to look into it. You’re doing the right thing. But I also know that mystery-conjuring mind of yours.”

He didn’t know the half of it. She’d only told him a few of her tales. “That was a long time ago, bro.”

“Once a sleuth . . . but seriously, you might consider talking to someone. Maybe someone there at the foundation or some accounting type.”

“Probably a good idea.” She would consider it anyway. “What’s the news?”

Her brother shared about an intricate operation that he was able to perform, a facial reconstruction that would allow a child to look as normal as all the others. “Children who have birth defects here are terribly mistreated.”

“I can’t imagine the type of bullying they must experience.”

“Beyond bullying. Children who are different are targeted, regularly beaten, and often killed. Like open season.”

“That’s horrible.” And shocking.

“So, you can imagine how important this surgery was to the little boy and his widowed mother.” Peter’s voice resonated with compassion.

It reminded her again of why she did what she did. It wasn’t the family. Not even her parents. She did what she did to help the children who benefitted from their many charities and learned that God loved them in a real and personal way.



When she got off the phone with her brother she decided to take his advice and continue to pursue this issue with the finances.

And the first issue was to find Clint. She hurried across the reception room to the opposite wing where most of the rooms were used by volunteers. Mrs. Hodges waved at her, absently, as she spoke on the phone with someone.

She made her way to the large office for those volunteers tasked with desk work, typing and such. Clints office was at one end of it. She tapped her knuckles just below his nameplate. “Clint?”

She’d not really expected an answer and bumped her hip lightly against the door. Sure enough, it opened. It hadn’t latched well since her brother, Paul, ran into it when they were playing chase a dozen years ago.

The space had been Connie’s when she served as an intern a few years back. She flicked on the switch, and the bare surfaces of the office showed before her just as she remembered them. The only homey effect in the entire office was a large Wright family portrait on the opposite wall. Connie had only been ten, sitting cross-legged on the ground with red bows in her dark hair and a matching sweater over her plaid dress.

So, she had worn red at one point. More like Mama had dressed her in the color. But maybe this weekend she’d shop a little. Maybe some red accessories, like a belt. Or shoes

She rounded the edge of the desk. The least she could do was leave Clint a sticky note requesting that he come see her. His computer’s screen saver danced around like some ancient video game that her brother, Paul, had taught her how to play.

A yellow pad perched on the edge of the desk. She picked it up and reached for a pen but caught the feel of deep indentions under her fingertips. She gave the surface of the pad a long look. Clint had probably used a pen that was low on ink so had pressed down hard.

She set the pad back down and picked up a pencil from the cup beside the monitor. Yeah, she was being a little on the nosy side, but her policeman brother Paul had showed her this technique once. Her curiosity drove her to see if it really worked.

At least, that's what she told herself. She lightly ran the side of the pencil across the sticky note pad. The top of it had several letters, both caps and lowercase. Looked like a password for something, though there weren't any numbers. But the line underneath it was all numbers and no letters, but a gap splitting the line.

She kept shading the rest of the page. Her eyes widened at the last notation, *1.5M*. Something itched the back of her neck. Was that million? As in dollars? Surely it was something silly like meters? Or maybe it was 1.5 million people.

Still, what seemed to be the impression of a dollar sign appeared in the space in front of the one. Her imagination might be running away with her, but either way, she wasn't about to leave the evidence behind that she'd even been in this office. Pulling the top few sheets from the pad, she returned the pencil to the cup and exited the office, flicking off the switch as she went. She pulled the door almost closed again and scampered in her flats back to her own office. She stuck the pages onto the surface of her desk and jotted down a note on her own blue notepad.

*Mr. Rutherford,
Please come see me in my office.
Connie Wright*

She trotted back down the hallway and stuck the note on the doorframe of his office. Surely, he would see it if he'd missed the emails she'd sent.



Back in her office, Connie stared at the shaded page. She probably indulged in too many Perry Mason episodes, but her gut bothered her about this note.

With Mama and Dad at Margaret's visiting her family, though, she really didn't have anyone she discuss it with. She slipped the pages into the pocket of her brown pants and strolled down to the reception desk.

"Well, there's the beautiful girl." Mrs. Hodges gave her a glowing grin. She was a picture of professionalism. Mama probably had her in this position for that exact reason. "What can I do for you, dear?"

"I wonder if you've seen Clint Rutherford this week?" If anyone had, it would be Mrs. Hodges.

She pursed her lips for a moment and her forehead wrinkled. "You know he works at another office."

Connie had gotten that vibe when he mentioned his freelancing gigs.

Mrs. Hodges continued, "He usually comes in on Mondays and Thursdays. But I don't remember seeing him at all this week."

"Is that normal for him?" Maybe he had a habit of working from home since her parents were out of town. "Have you heard from him?"

"No. It's really rather strange. The only other time I remember him missing a day he had scheduled to work, he called because he had a doctor appointment. Very conscientious young man, there."

Sounded like she thought well of him, too. "Was he scheduled for Monday and today?"

She opened the book on the counter behind her. "Yes for today." She flipped back several pages. "Yes on Monday as well."

"And you haven't heard from him?"

"No." She drew the word out and turned another page in the planner. "Oh, there's a note here that he spoke to Frank last week." She glanced up at Connie. "Could that be your brother?"

"I can certainly find out."

Chapter Nine

Revelation from Niece #2

Introducing Skye from Book 5 by Dena Netherton

Skye Wright lounged in a chair on the patio of Our Kids foster care home. She breathed in the scented air and shaded her eyes to get another look at the lovely gardens surrounding her. It hadn't taken Skye more than two days visiting the nearby town with her parents to decide that when she grew up, this beautiful town would be her forever home. What could be more exciting than a college town with lots of fun eateries, coffee houses that invited singers and guitarists to perform, and real-life college guys? Even the weather suited her with its clouds and the mists that shrouded the tall, tall trees overshadowing the town. It thrilled her romantic soul.

Too bad her parents had to spend so much time talking business with Jon and Elaine Carpenter, the current operators of the Our Kids foster care charity. Her mom and dad had the idea to make Our Kids another one of the charities that Grandpa Mac's foundation could help support.

At first, Skye had thought, what a bore. Especially since that creepy accountant, Clint Rutherford, had insisted on coming along to help check out Our Kids financial statements on behalf of the Wright Foundation. Her dad seemed to think the world of him. But she had taken an instant dislike to the man. Maybe it was his eyes. Always checking around himself like he expected someone to draw a gun and start shooting. And anyway, she didn't understand any of that financial stuff he did. But why was the guy so curious about a little charity like Our Kids? It's not like the foster care home made tons of money.

Not that Clint Rutherford skimmed on anything. He'd flown first class while they sat in economy. And he'd taken a room at a fancy hotel near the waterfront while she and Mom and Dad shared a room here at the home. But this place had as nice a view as any hotel. And she'd had a blast when they took the tour.

Maybe Mom and Dad would even let her go to college here. Wouldn't that be amazing?

But first she had to start high school this fall.

And do well in school.

And graduate.

Skye checked the time on her cell phone. Almost noon. She hauled herself out of the chaise lounge and headed for the back door of Our Kids. Mom had said they'd be eating lunch downtown, close to the University. Then maybe, they'd walk around and do some shopping for souvenirs.

As soon as she stepped inside, the phone on the kitchen wall rang. Mr. Carpenter and his wife were both out this morning, visiting a potential donor. Should she answer? Maybe Mom or

Dad would pick up. But the phone continued to ring. On the fifth ring, she decided to answer.

Before she could identify herself, she heard her dad's happy voice echoing through the line. "Hi, sis. Good to hear your voice."

Aunt Connie! She hadn't seen her aunt in months. Aunt Connie had been away at college and had just graduated. They'd missed her graduation ceremony. Skye had wanted to go, but Mom and Dad had to be out of town that weekend.

Aunt Connie's upbeat tone sounded like she was in the next room. "Frank, how's it going out there?"

Her father said something about the weather being "just fantastic" and blah, blah, blah. Skye was about to hang up, but then Aunt Connie's voice took on a serious tone. "Frank, I'm not being nosy. Just curious, and it's a long shot, but I wondered if you've spoken to Clint Rutherford recently."

Skye held onto the receiver and covered her mouth so her dad wouldn't be able to hear her breathing. Anything about the creepy Mr. Rutherford was worth hearing about.

"Why, he's with us now. We've traveled to meet with a charity and some of the financiers of it," her father said. "Initially we thought we'd come out all by ourselves to meet Jon and Elaine Carpenter. They've been running Our Kids foster care for about ten years now and I've heard such good things about the charity that I thought Calista and I should check it out."

"And Skye? Is she with you?"

"Oh, she wanted to go visit with Mac while we came out here, but we insisted she sample some of the culture. I think she's starting to enjoy herself."

"And you said Mr. Rutherford did as well?"

Why was Aunt Connie so interested in finding out if the creepy guy had come along?

"He called me last week to let me know that the foundation was interested and he would be joining us. But he's not with us right now. We're staying at Our Kids for the week. Clint's gotten himself a fancy room at the Inn and Spa down by the water."

The sigh on the other end of the line told Skye that her dad's answer was not satisfactory for Aunt Connie. But her brilliant aunt was not going to give up easily.

"Did Clint say why he wanted to join you guys? Seems like a waste of valuable time and money to fly out, and stay in some fancy hotels for a little charity like Our Kids."

Her dad made a kind of grunt noise like he pondered Aunt Connie's words. "He, uh, said it was always good to thoroughly check out the financial books of any charity the foundation was considering donating to."

"I see," was all her aunt said in reply.

"Connie, you sound kind of concerned. Is there anything you need to tell me? I mean, so far, I'm really impressed with Our Kids. They run a tight ship. I've met all the kids and you can tell

they feel loved and secure. And I've talked with lots of people who live in the area. They all know about Our Kids and can't say enough good things about it. And Jon and Elaine are super people."

"That's great to hear, Frank. No, I'm not concerned. Just dotting my i's and crossing my t's, so to speak."

"Okay, sis." He chuckled. "I'm sure you're already putting that new degree to good use."

Aunt Connie laughed good-naturedly. "You bet, Frank. Well, thanks for telling me about Our Kids. And please tell Skye to take pictures and write about her visit in her journal. I've a feeling she's going to want to explore more of that area when she gets older."

"Will do, Connie."

Skye silently replaced the receiver. So, Aunt Connie wanted information on Clint Rutherford. Interesting. Did she feel the same dislike Skye felt for the man? Her aunt was only about ten years older than Skye. Almost like a big sister. When Skye got a rare chance to spend the weekend with Aunt Connie, they did fun things and spent hours just talking. Maybe next time they had a weekend together they could gossip about that creepy Clint Rutherford.

She left the kitchen and mounted the stairs to the bedroom she shared with her parents. Lunch in town close to the university was gonna be so much fun. And later, she could call Mac and tell her about all the cute college guys she saw downtown.



"Well, I found Clint Rutherford." Connie sauntered back out to the reception desk.

"With your brother Frank?"

"I'm not sure why he felt the need to go out there and investigate the financial situation of Our Kids, but that's what he did." And staying at a fancy hotel to boot. No wonder there wasn't enough for Connie to join Mama and Dad at the fundraising event.

Mrs. Hodges tilted her head as she regarded Connie. "Is something else bothering you, my dear?"

Connie sighed. "I probably overstepped my bounds, but Dad told me that the foundation is having some financial trouble." Maybe she shouldn't have shared that with the woman, but she needed a sympathetic ear.

"I have heard."

"Dad told you?" That didn't sound like her father.

"Oh no, no. Diana Carson told me about it. She said that the accounts were already under pressure because of some unexpected unbudgeted expenses this year. But then she only handled the fundraising expenses, you know."

“What changed?” Besides the hot water heater and the roof. Of course, those problems couldn’t have been expected.

“Oh, you would need to speak to a far smarter person than I am to answer that question. Mr. Rutherford would be your best bet, or someone else who has the sort of financial background that he has.” She frowned and then scurried around the counter in bright red high heels and reached out to envelope Connie in a brief hug. “Don’t worry, dear. God has proven time after time that He is working through the Wright Foundation. He will prove it again. You wait and see.”

Connie gave her another tight hug. “Thank you, Mrs. Hodges. You have always been such an inspiration to me.”

“Oh fiddle. You, with that stellar smile, make an impact wherever you go. And God is using you, Little Bit.”

Her use of the childhood nickname made Connie rather wispy. “I don’t know.” She certainly hoped that she was stepping down the path that God had for her.

“Oh, yes, you do. He has put a passion in your heart for this and has led you all along. You don’t have to do things the way your mom always has. You’re the head of fundraising now. Put your own stamp on the position and everything involved.”

Mrs. Hodges was right. And it started with Connie unapologetically getting to the bottom of these financial problems. They affected her activities and her position since she wasn’t even able to attend this week’s fundraising event. So even if she wasn’t an accounting type, she had every right to stick her nose fully in.

She smiled at the older lady and touched her shoulders. “I’m gonna do that very thing.”

Chapter Ten

Possibilities from Niece #1

Introducing Laura from Book 7 by Marji Laine

Laura Chastain sat poolside, watching her daughter Mackenzie's lesson. She completed a full length of the pool then turned and bobbed her head with a proud grin.

Laura gave her a silent applause.

Her mother, in the lounge chair beside her pointed at Mackenzie and tsked. "The child is looking more and more like my baby sister."

Mother was right. The grin so resembled Connie's it was almost frightening.

Not that Connie was scary herself. At twenty four and more than ten years younger than Laura, the girl seemed little more than a child. And one for whom her mother, Connie's oldest sister, had no patience or tolerance.

"I suppose she is affronted because we didn't attend her graduation." Mother sniffed.

Laura shrugged. Her mother needed Laura to be her confidant. It was why she and Addison had brought Little Mac and moved in with Mother. The beginning stages of dementia were early, but they were definitely there.

That didn't mean Laura had to always agree with her opinions, though. "I haven't heard from her, but with her new position in the foundation, she likely has little time right now to be worrying over affronts."

Her mother blew out a puff between her lips. "Father should have his head examined to give such authority and responsibility to a mere child."

"Mother, please." Laura glanced around to be sure that Grandfather MacKenzie wasn't nearby. "Connie has spent her entire life helping with the fundraising and the daily workings of the foundation."

"As did we all. Peter, Frank, Polly, Eva Grace, Kimberly, Paul, and I helped Mother and Father. More, I dare say, than the baby. Everything was already established by the time she came into the picture."

But Connie had stayed, whereas the others had found their own paths. However, she wouldn't stir up that potion with Mother.

Her daughter's lesson ended, and Laura stood as Grandmother Eleanor and Grandfather MacKenzie rounded the edge of the patio. "Was the meeting successful?" Laura had never had dealings with the foundation, but she enjoyed her grandparents' visits when they came to support one of the local children's charities.

"It was a nice party." Grandmother nodded her head, but her smile didn't reach her eyes. Maybe because she hadn't been in charge for the first time.

“I know that look, Mother. What did Constance forget?”

“Oh, no. Connie didn’t have anything to do with this event. In fact, I deeply regret that I didn’t include her in the planning of it.”

“It turned out fine, Eleanor.” Grandfather took her hand in his own. “I think you’re right. Connie would have done a better job than the volunteer who had taken charge, but the donors still came through for us.”

“Then maybe Constance isn’t as needed as you believe.” Mother scowled up at her parents.

Laura hesitated. “You know, the breeze is lovely right now. Why don’t you take a walk?” Mother had put in a special footpath that circumnavigated the entire garden to the edge of the woods.

“That sounds like a treat.” Grandfather gave her a grin. “And you take Little Mac inside before she freezes. Her teeth are chattering.”

Laura picked up a thick towel as Mackenzie headed toward them.

Mother joined her parents on the edge of the patio. “Please have Wanda make up some light sandwiches.”

“I’ll do that.” Laura watched the trio make their way down the path. Mother looked more like a sister to Grandmother than her daughter. And from this vantage point, where her grandparents’ wrinkles didn’t show, Mother looked to be the older of the three. Of course, her solid white dye job didn’t help with that.

Laura ushered her daughter into the hallway and sent her up to her room.

“Sweetheart, can you come in here?” Her husband Addison stood in the doorway of his study, and then stepped back inside, closing the door behind them both.

“She’s here, Connie.”

Laura lowered herself to the cushion of the leather sofa and shut her eyes for a moment. Here came the guilt.

“I have the speaker turned on so she can hear the conversation as well.” He sat behind his desk.

Laura sighed and tried to put on a pleasant expression. “Is something the matter, Connie?” She had never been able to bring herself to call the girl *Aunt* Connie.

“Are Mama or Dad around?” Connie sounded unnaturally nervous over the line.

“No, they’re in the gardens with Mother.” Why would she care about that?

“I’m simply not sure what to do. If I should take any action at all.” The sound of shuffling followed her sisters voice with the squeak of the door. “I had hoped to speak to the man by now, but he’s been out of town. Oh, and please don’t tell Dad that I’m calling you.”

“No worries there.” Addison picked up a pen from a holder. “But you can’t keep this from your father if there really is something going on.”

What was going on? Clearly, she'd not come in at the beginning of the call.

"Oh, I plan to tell Dad all about it if there is, but he seems to really trust this man."

"What man?" Laura finally spoke up.

"It's a new accountant who is volunteering a couple of times a week. Dad has basically turned all the finances over to him."

Addison stared toward the speaker on his desk. "I thought the foundation was pretty strong financially. I worked with MacKenzie myself a couple of years ago to be sure the investments were sound."

"I don't think there's an issue with the investments," Connie assured them. "The problem is with the regular accounts. Apparently some of our donors aren't giving like they have been, but the person who has that information is currently traveling."

"So, since this man has been in charge of the finances, problems have developed?" Laura had trouble believing that. Grandfather was always so careful with the foundation. This didn't sound like him at all.

"I can't say that it's happened since he took over, but it sure seems to be an issue now. That's why I'm looking into it."

Addison turned to his home office computer. "Tell you what, why don't you send me the things you've learned."

"I can't very well send you the sticky note," Connie explained what she'd found when she shaded the note. "I don't have one of those fancy phones that can take photos."

"Sounds like you're up to your old tricks, Madame Detective." Laura couldn't resist a little tease. Every visit during Connie's childhood would end up with her sneaking around corners and hiding in cabinets to spy on her siblings.

Connie had the grace to chuckle. "I'd be willing to spy on him if he was here, but he's not. And I'm having trouble getting answers. Especially about these odd numbers and letters on his notepad."

"Fax it." Addison told her. "Or just type in what you can read from it."

"I can do that." The sound of typing keys came through the speaker.

"And Connie, I'd like to take a look at the donor files."

The typing halted. "Oh, I don't know about that."

The donor files were top secret. Even Laura knew that with her limited knowledge of the business. "Did Grandfather give the new man access to the donor files?"

"I can't tell, but my gut says yes. Clint's been with Frank this week speaking to a number of financiers for one of the charities we expect to support soon."

Addison tapped his fingertips lightly on his desk. "You have a reason for your concern. I think looking through the donor files is the next step if you can't access the foundation's

accounts.”

“Wait, what? You can’t see the bank accounts, Connie?” This sure sounded fishier than she’d first thought.

“My password doesn’t work, and my email is no longer associated with the accounts. Neither is Dad’s”

Addison leaned forward. “Going to the donors themselves seems the only option. I can have some of my people contact them as representatives of the foundation.”

“I can’t let you talk with them. If the donors get wind that there’s a potential problem, they might very well pull out altogether.”

Smart thinking. Laura had to at least credit Connie with that one. Then Laura had an idea. “What if you simply called them to ask about their pledges. You can let them know that it’s for planning purposes. Do they intend to maintain their commitment for next year.”

Addison bobbed his head. “Surely they will accept that.”

“That’s not a bad idea, Laura.”

Business wasn’t really her thing, but it sure stroked her confidence to have her aunt’s approval.

“Tell you what, Addison. You work on deciphering the numbers and letters on the sticky note. I’m sending them to you now. I’ll contact the donors. That way, we can maintain the confidentiality.”

“I can understand that. And I’m happy we can help. I’ll watch for your email. Oh, and Connie, you need to have your father set a halt on the accounts until you get this matter sorted out. I can talk to him about it tonight. They aren’t leaving until tomorrow.”

Connie paused for a second. “No. Please don’t mention any of this to him. I’ll take care of it in the morning.”

“Let us know if you have anything else you need. And I’ll get back with you soon about the code you found.”

“Thanks, guys. I so appreciate your wisdom in this.”

As the speaker went silent, Addison lifted an appreciative glance to his wife. “Pretty sharp cookie I married.” He came around the desk and kissed her temple.

She smiled up at him, but the situation Connie shared troubled her. “Do you think there’s really something wrong at the foundation?”

His brows furrowed. “I think your grandfather might have made the first mistake I’ve ever noticed. And it isn’t about bringing Connie into the family business.”

Laura gave him a squeeze around his waist. “Just don’t let Mother hear you say that.”



Connie hung up the phone on her desk. It was too late to do anything with the bank at this point, but she'd be sure to speak to someone tomorrow morning. She glanced up at the miniature of the family portrait that Mama kept on the shelf directly in front of her. She'd actually touched base with almost all of her siblings.

Well, except Margaret, but she had talked to her niece and Addison. That was close enough. She still needed to touch base with Paul. Especially Paul, since his job as a policeman gave him a unique perspective over what she'd been able to piece together.

She dialed the number to the house and listened to the ringing several times before her sister-in-law's greeting came over the phone.

"Hi Maggie, it's Connie."

"Well, hi, long-lost stranger. What's it been a week? Ten days?"

"Ha ha." The fact was, she and Paul spoke at least once a week, sometimes more often, so her sis-in-law's ribbing had some foundation. "Is he there?"

"Nope, he'll be home in the morning, though. Is something wrong?"

Connie gave her the lowdown on what she knew and the questions still unanswered. "If he can give me a call or something when he gets off, I'd really appreciate talking it through with him."

"I'll let him know."

Connie hung up her phone and then packed up her laptop computer. Tomorrow, maybe she could untangle the matter enough to get some answers.



The next day offered a brief and uneventful trip to the bank. Connie's name wasn't on the accounts so she couldn't see them, and she couldn't put any sort of stoppage on them. Not without a court order.

Dad would have to do it if he could be persuaded. And that certainly wouldn't happen with only her suspicions and suppositions to spur her imagination. But then the fact that Dad's access to the accounts was also missing gave ample reason for her concern.

"Mrs. Hodges, would you assist me?" Connie pushed her desk chair across the tile floor to the reception desk.

"Well, of course, my dear. But if you need clerical work, Diana is due here this afternoon."

"Not clerical work. I need to contact all of our donors."

Her eyebrows ruffled. "Whatever for?"

"I've heard the story that some of the donors aren't giving what they had pledged. The only

way to really check that is to call and ask.”

Mrs. Hodges tilted her head. “I don’t think that’s a very good idea. Just to call and ask them? They might be insulted. Or worse, they might be afraid there is a problem here and decide to pull out altogether.”

“I know. So, I thought we’d call concerning planning purposes for next year. Asking if the pledge they made for this year would be roughly the same next year to help us plan our events and sponsored charities.”

“Oh.” She lifted her chin and let it drop in a slow nod. “Well, that’s different. It might not get all the information that you want, but it will give you a good idea of who’s continuing to give and perhaps insight into why a few have decreased their amounts.”

“Exactly what I thought. I have a few things to check, but I’ll meet you back here in an hour or so to start ringing up the donors if you’re game.”

And thankfully the dear woman was on board with her.

Chapter Eleven

Assistance from Sib #7

Introducing Paul from Book 4 by Shawna Robison Young

Paul Wright stepped out of his police cruiser and headed toward his front door where his wife and little girl waited. The rising, morning sun peeked through the trees and momentarily blinded him.

“Hey guys. Why are you up so early?” He stepped onto the porch and leaned in to give his wife a kiss.

Maggie returned it. “You know the early bird gets the worm.” Smiling, she nodded towards their daughter who always rose before the sun no matter how late they put her to bed.

Little Teagan wrapped her arms around his legs. “Daddy, I just gotta see you every morning before you go to sleep. How was your beat? Did you serve and protect?”

“Always.” Paul lifted his daughter into his arms and tapped her nose. He loved it when she used police terminology. It reminded him how much she listened and watched him. “Were you a good girl last night? Did you help, mommy?”

Teagan nodded. “I washed the dishes.”

“Good girl.” He placed her on the ground and spun her around by her fingertips.

“Connie called last night.” Maggie’s voice and eyes held worry.

Paul let go of Teagan’s hand. “Is she okay?”

“Your sister fears that something fishy is going on at the foundation. They’re having some financial trouble, apparently. Her and your father’s account accesses are inactive, and passwords aren’t working either. It does all sound a little sketchy. Your parents are out of town. Your other siblings have all weighed in, but she’s beginning to wonder if there’s something criminal going on. I didn’t want to bother you at work, but I think something might be up. Connie reached out to your brothers and sisters. That, in itself, proves that she really believes something bad is going down.”

Maggie was right. Connie needed him, and he would be there for her. He had the next couple of days off. He looked down at his watch. A five-hour drive would get him to Chicago around noon. So what if he’d been up all night working a twelve-hour shift?

Nothing a little coffee wouldn’t fix. He’d get some shut eye later after helping his baby sister.

“I already made you a breakfast sandwich and a thermos full of black coffee.” Maggie raised an eyebrow. “You are planning to go to her, right? Not just call?”

He kissed his wife’s cheek. “Ah, you know me so well.”

She squeezed his hand. “Best husband, dad, and brother on the planet. Connie is lucky to

have you. We all are.”

He gave her another kiss. “I’m the lucky one.”

“You better head out soon. I’ll call Connie and tell her you are on the way.”

His sister had a wild imagination from time to time and tended to see a mystery when there was none to be found, but it wouldn’t hurt to do a little investigation work if it eased Connie’s mind. Besides, she had a good head on her shoulder. If she felt something was wrong, then she was more than likely right.

Five hours later, he pulled into the parking lot. The foundation building hadn’t changed much in five years since he’d visited last, and according to his parents even most of the volunteers remained the same too. It appeared nearly all of them were out to lunch now except for Mrs. Hodges who waved from her reception chair as he walked through the door.

Her smile spread across her wrinkled face. “Well, well, look what the cat dragged in.”

“Hello, Mrs. Hodges. Is Connie around?”

“She’s back in the volunteer accountant’s office. She’s been working herself to the bone trying to figure out why some of the donors are reportedly giving less than they pledged. It isn’t true of course, but I think she feels responsible for this situation. Thank goodness you’re here. You are her knight in shining armor.” She winked. “You know that, right.”

He nodded. He’d taken his role as big brother seriously since the day she’d been born.

“Sometimes I feel like the only one in the family who stands up for that girl.” He shook his head. “I don’t get it. She’s a gem and has worked so hard to achieve all she has at such a young age. I don’t know why they count her out.”

“Plight of being the baby of the family.” She gave him another wink and then answered the ringing phone.

Paul slipped into the volunteer wing of the building and quietly opened the door to the office. Connie sat in the chair, facing the bulletin board behind the desk, her back turned away from the door. He snuck in and wrapped his arms around her.

She swung around and smacked him. “Paul, don’t do that. You scared the bejabbers out of me.”

He patted the top of her head, the same way he always did. It was his affectionate and fun way of calling her short and him tall. “You were daydreaming about crimes and murders and such, I assume.” He raised an eyebrow at her. He loved teasing her.

She winked. “Not this time.” She tottered her head back and forth. “Well actually, maybe I was a little. I can’t shake the feeling that Clint—the new accountant . . . Have you met him?”

“No, but Dad raves about how amazing he is.”

Connie pointed toward him. “Exactly. I don’t think Dad is seeing the full picture. Our emails associated with our bank accounts and my foundation passwords aren’t working. And the donors

are, reportedly, lowering their donations or stopping their payments altogether. According to Clint, but he's out of town, lounging in a luxury hotel, so I can't ask him any questions."

She pulled the sticky note from her pocket that had been shaded to show several numbers and letters. "And why would Clint write 1.5 million? Is that how much he's trying to steal from the foundation?"

"You really think the new accountant is taking money from the donors and the foundation?"

She continued talking, obviously unaware he'd asked her a question. "Of course, I guess anyone could have written that number down, but he's the one most often working in here."

Paul pointed to the note. "I see I've taught you well. You rubbed the imprint off onto this sticky note?"

"Yes, how else does one find evidence on a crook?" She flashed him a winning smile. "But seriously. I need something to prove Clint is up to something. I feel it in my bones. Something is off about him. Mama and Dad may not see it, but I do."

Paul nodded. Once his sister had her suspicions she ran with it. That was for sure. "I believe you are on to something, but we need to look at all angles. Who else could possibly have both the access and ability to tap into the donors' information? Or the know-how to change the passwords." He pointed to the computer. "You mind if I take a look and see what I can dig up."

She stood. "Please, do."

He plopped into the chair. "Give me an hour or so."

"Do you need anything from me?"

"How about a cup of coffee? Black."

"And I'll order us a Chicago-style deep-dish."

He clapped his hands together once then pointed at her. "Best sister ever."

Some time later, Paul wiped pizza sauce off the side of his mouth with the back of his hand then took another swig of his coffee. The scanning of the hard drive would have come faster if the volunteer computer wasn't ancient and if he had access to the search programs at his station, but he was making some headway. Only a few files left on the drive.

A male voice along with Connie's came from down the hall. Paul didn't recognize the other voice. Perhaps the missing man had returned? He should go out and introduce himself.

He paused and straightened glancing up at the door. The voices seemed to get softer, like they were moving away.

Good. He really wanted to finish this.

He clicked on a file labeled *W.F.D.L.B.* Inside the file, folder upon folder filled the screen. Twenty-seven untitled folders in total, twenty-six of them empty. He clicked on the last unnamed file.

Inside of it a blank folder labeled *B.B.T.* held a Word document of names underlined with

hyperlinks. Connie. Dad. Clint Rutherford. Anna Hodges. Diana Carson, the rest of the volunteers, along with people and companies he knew to be long-standing donors to the foundation and several he didn't recognize. He slid his finger down the list.

Bahama Bank and Trust? Had they partnered with the Wright Foundation? They did have donors from all over the world. The folder was labeled B.B.T. Did that stand for Bahama Bank and Trust? He clicked on the hyperlink. It went to their website. Was this the account where the donors were directed to send their money?

He should ask Connie, but that could wait.

He clicked through several of the other hyperlinks. Each one pulled up email addresses, phone numbers, and addresses for the donor, volunteer, or company.

He finally reached Clint Rutherford's name. Same as all the rest of the links—a breakdown of his contact information. Nothing suspicious. Except . . . a second page? With another hyperlink for something called, "goalscrbtt1.5m." He clicked it and it took him to a yahoo email account password box.

Hmm. I wonder.

He entered the letters from the post-it note that Connie gave him. The email account opened.

Paul clapped his hands together once and pointed to the screen. *Bingo*. Everything he needed to prove Connie's suspicions were correct glared at him from the screen. Something shady *was* going down at foundation.

"That-a-girl, baby sister. You are definitely, the right Wright for the job."

Chapter Twelve

Confirmation from Donors

Once the pizza had arrived, Connie and Mrs. Hodges split up the donor list and began calling.

An hour into the phone calls, Connie began to see a pattern. “Thank you, Mr. Hardy. And I’ll be sure to pass along your greeting to my dad.” Connie smiled at the receiver even though the dear man wouldn’t see her appreciation.

Mrs. Hodges hung up the reception phone just as Connie set her cell phone down. “Well, so far, all of the donors that I’ve called seemed to still be giving.”

The older woman tapped the tip of a ballpoint pen on a notepad. “I don’t understand it. Your father told Diana specifically that one of the donors I called was no longer giving at all. She said he was rather heart-broken about it because he and Eleanor knew the woman personally, and she had supported the foundation from day one.. But on the phone, the woman didn’t indicate that she’d stopped giving or even reduced her donations.” She gave Connie a quizzical look. “In fact, she said she’d just put in a payment using the new process as instructed.”

“What new process?” The hairs on the back of Connie’s neck stood up.

“Well, I didn’t ask her. I didn’t want to alarm her, but I haven’t heard of any new process. Do you suppose it’s going into a new account?”

A chill scampered across her shoulders. Was that what was going on? She snapped her fingers and pointed at the sky like Mrs. Hodges always did. “That’s it.”

“You know what’s happening.”

“It isn’t that the donors aren’t giving anymore. It’s that their donations are being transferred to someone else.” Connie’s cell phone vibrated on the counter, and she picked it up as the ring began. “This is Connie Wright.”

“Addison here.”

“Have you learned anything?”

“Well, we couldn’t decipher the letter string that you sent, but the numbers were a different story.” Her nephew-in-law began to explain some long process, but Connie’s brain wasn’t completely wrapping around it. She bit her tongue, hoping to hear something she could make heads or tails out of.

“So, with a little perseverance, and probably a bit of conniving, my assistant was able to identify a couple of bank accounts in the Bahamas. He was actually able to look at the funds there. He couldn’t touch any of it, of course, but he found a couple hundred dollars between the two.”

It was probably a good thing that Connie hadn’t understood Addison’s process. She really

didn't want to know how his worker was able to ferret out that information. "There's still nothing to say that Clint Rutherford has anything to do with it, though, is there?"

"I'm afraid not."

She thanked Addison and hung up as Mrs. Hodges completed another call. "There's another happy donor. Mr. Iverson is even planning to increase his giving next year."

"Did he say anything about a new process?"

"I didn't give him the chance. I told him that he might have heard about a new procedure for the gifts, but that we were sticking with the way we had been doing it all along. He was pleased that he didn't have to change his direct payment."

"Good." She pointed at her phone. "Margaret's son-in-law was looking into the data that I found on the notepad in Clint's office. He connected the numbers with two different bank accounts in the Bahamas."

Her eyes widened. "I bet that's where the money went."

No real proof of that, but Connie's gut told her it was indeed a good bet.

Connie's phone chimed, and she glanced at it. Gretchen. Connie pulled up the text.

CR – LT CHI RES. WKD @ DOBESON CPA.

Gretchen and her shorthand. Well, *CR* was likely Clint Rutherford. Light shy rez? *CHI* would be Chicago, Chi-town. And *RES* most likely meant resident. But *LT*?

Long-time! And Dobeson CPA had to have been the other freelancing job that he spoke of.

Wait a minute. The *WKD* bugged her. *Works* would be *WKS* in Gretchen text language. *WKD* is either *weekend*, which wouldn't make any sense at all, not even in Gretchen-speak, or it would be *worked*. Past tense. But he'd talked about his other job as though it were current.

She opened her internet app and looked up the company, then clicked on the phone number to call it.

"Dobeson CPA. How may I help you?" The woman's voice was on the perky side of professional.

"I'd like to speak with Clint Rutherford, please." The man had been with her brother Frank, but maybe he'd returned.

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Rutherford no longer works here."

Connie started to thank the woman, but a thought entered her mind. She put on an elderly voice. "Well, I don't understand. Mr. Rutherford has been working on my accounts for some time now. Where has he gone?"

"If you'll give me your name, ma'am."

Connie couldn't exactly give her that. "I was supposed to contact him when I was ready for

him to go through a new audit. How can I reach him?"

"I'm afraid I don't know."

"Well, surely you have some way to reach the man." Connie pressed. "He couldn't have just fallen off the face of the earth."

"We haven't been able to reach him."

"For how long?"

"If I can have your name, ma'am, I'll have one of our other agents contact you—"

"No, no. I want to at least speak to the man before I decide to hand over my business to someone else. How long has he been out of communication with you?"

"Oh, it's been at least a couple of months, ma'am. We really have no way to contact him. He had no family or even an emergency contact. But we do have some wonderful agents here who can help you."

"Well, thank you. I'll think about it and let you know." Connie set her receiver back in its cradle. She stared at the desktop. Clint Rutherford hadn't been working at his job for months. And he'd only been at the foundation for a few months. Did the times coincide?

Before she could contemplate that question, Clint Rutherford came in through the front door.



Connie glanced at Mrs. Hodges. "We need to keep him out of his office." There was no telling what state the office was in. They needed to give Paul as much time as possible to complete his investigation.

"Mr. Rutherford." Connie stepped into his path as he began to veer toward the volunteer wing.

"Clint, please." He gave her smile right out of a Disney movie. "How are you settling in, Connie?"

She hadn't invited him to use her first name, but that was an old-fashioned thought. "Well enough. Thank you." She held out her hand toward the executive hallway. "I have a couple of things I'd like to ask you about."

"Certainly, let me drop my case off." He sidestepped toward his hallway, but she tucked her hand around his arm.

"It won't take but a second. I have an idea about the reimbursement that I'd like to show you on my board." Why had she said that? Her board was a smorgasbord of Mama's notes and cards. Nothing business about it. She'd have to come up with something.

"Well, all right." He curled his arm up and squeezed her hand against his side, drawing her much closer than she wanted to be.

“So, you have been traveling?” She gave him a sidelong glance and fell into step beside him.

“Yes, I went down to meet with Frank Wright. I guess that would be your brother. Seems strange since he’s so much older.”

Funny that he would be so candid. She halfway thought he’d try to hide where he’d been since he hadn’t bothered to tell anyone that he was leaving. “Mrs. Hodges was a little worried about you.”

He tilted his head. “That’s odd.”

“How so?”

“Mrs. Hodges knew where I was. And I was able to speak to a number of potential donors who are interested in investing in the Our Kids charity.”

He went into detail, but Connie hung on the revelation. *Mrs. Hodges had known all along where he was?* Why had she made it seem like she didn’t know?

The man paused, apparently concluding his monologue about the charity.

“That sounds very promising.” She held her breath. Hopefully, that would be a reasonable response.

“I thought so.”

Good. She reached her door and unlocked it. “How were you able to get off from your job for so long.” That should be an innocent enough question.

“Tennyson & Carstairs are quite liberal in their time off.”

Wait a minute. Not Dobeson? That explained a lot. “How long have you worked for Tennyson & Carstairs?”

“Only a few months, surprisingly enough. They lured me away from my former company and have made good on every promise. Including my time off.”

That fit in with what she’d learned about him. Could she have been wrong about him?

Chapter Thirteen

True Confessions from the Missing

Connie opened the door to her office and stepped aside to let Clint in. She started to shut it, and thought better of the action, leaving it halfway open.

“Where’s this plan you wanted to show me?” He eyed her mom’s bulletin board.

She gave it a once over. There was nothing there but thank you cards and a survey form from the grocery store. She snapped her finger at her side and smoothed her navy skirt. She pulled the survey from the board. “I thought a couple of my primary volunteers, the ones who establish our purchase orders, could make a list of items that are regularly purchased.”

“How is that supposed to help.” He didn’t bother to look at the form that she held out to him.

“Well, that way, you can either accept or reject the items on the list before anyone spends money on them. The purchaser can have a pretty good idea you will approve the purchase.” She sounded like an idiot, but at least she was keeping him out of his office.

Not that her brother would likely find anything on the computer in there. Not if what she’d just learned about the man was indeed true.

He clasped his hands together around the handle of his briefcase and eyed her with suspicion. “Exactly why am I here?”

She had a choice. She could continue with the charade and try to excuse herself out of the situation by pretending to be a dunderhead, or she could challenge him with some of her own questions. “If the donors aren’t giving very well, then why is it you decided on extra expenditures to fly out to meet with my uncle?”

“Wouldn’t you agree that some donors need a more personal touch.”

He made a point. “But that shouldn’t require an expensive hotel and a first-class seat on the flight.” He couldn’t very well talk his way out of that.

He set his case beside him and folded his arms over his chest. “Are you investigating me?”

Yes, actually. “As I said, I wasn’t sure where you were.” She wouldn’t throw her niece under the bus.

“Why didn’t you ask Hodges?”

“She had no idea where you were.” That was all beside the point anyway. “And it doesn’t explain why you would spend so much when you know the donors are no longer giving as much as they had been?”

“Where did you hear that donors are no longer giving?”

What was with all his questions? As she thought through it, he hadn’t given her a straight answer since they’d arrived at her office. “Are you saying that it’s not true?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“So, it is true?” Somehow, she needed to get an actual answer out of this guy.

“I didn’t say that either.”

That was it. She’d had it. “Mr. Rutherford, if you can’t or won’t answer my questions, then I’m not sure you need to continue working for the foundation.”

“You don’t have the authority to fire me, Miss Wright. I don’t answer to you.”

Oh, this was infuriating. Whether this guy was guilty of something or not, she’d be talking to Dad. This type of attitude was not what she signed up for.

He picked up his case and moved to the door.

“Wait, why is it that we don’t have access to the bank accounts anymore?”

He turned and glared at her. “You have not been here. There has been no reason for you to have access to the accounts.”

“Well, I’m here now.”

“And you can take it up with your father.” He put his back to her again.

“He doesn’t have access to the accounts either.” Not something the man could so easily wiggle out of.

He didn’t turn around but pushed through the open door.

She stopped him in the hallway as Mrs. Hodges came trotting toward them. “Why doesn’t Dad have access to the accounts anymore.”

“Have you spoken to him?”

“I’m speaking to you.”

“And you should answer her.” Mrs. Hodges stepped close, blocking his way. Her normal smile was replaced by a pointed look that bordered on fierceness.

Once again, he set his briefcase down. His neck was flushed under the collar of his shirt. “Your father is in charge of his own accounts. If things are changed there, he did the changing. I was tasked with giving more security to the finances since there has been . . .” He paused, glanced at Mrs. Hodges, and took a deep breath. Then he looked back at Connie. “There have been some inconsistencies in the books. Some of the numbers aren’t adding up.”

Of course, that could simply be a difference of accounting or simple clerical errors if the numbers were low, but he seemed to insinuate otherwise. And if the 1.5 M did stand for money, then it was serious indeed.

Diana Carson rounded the corner and stopped short as the man continued.

“Because the issues have been happening for such a long time, I limited access to your father and mother and me. That way, I could be sure to at least stop the embezzlement even if I couldn’t find the person responsible.”

The word had finally been said aloud. It had such a dirty sound to it. Mrs. Hodges flinched

when he said it. Surely, she couldn't be involved.

"But I have a good idea who that person might be." He turned to the older woman. "Right?"

Chapter Fourteen

Not a Moment Too Soon

Mrs. Hodges' angry expression twisted into sheer confusion. "Me?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Connie couldn't for a moment believe it of this dear woman.

"Why is it then, that you pretended not to know where I was this past week?" Clint's face turned smug.

"Because I didn't." The confusion grew. She turned toward the reception area. "The calendar said you would be here. Didn't it Diana?"

Diana had taken a couple of steps backward until Mrs. Hodges called her name. "Uh. Yes. I think I saw that Mr. Rutherford would be here on Monday and yesterday."

"I left a note on the counter, Mrs. Hodges. You couldn't have missed it." He glanced up at Diana. "You were there when I put it down last Thursday as I left. Don't you remember?"

"I . . ." The volunteer bookkeeper's face was a mask of something unexpected. Not confusion. More like fear. "I'm not sure."

Connie stepped toward her. "You no longer have access to the accounts. Why didn't you mention that when I brought it up?"

"Well." She fidgeted for a second and then burst into tears. "I had always meant to pay it all back."

The revelation stunned Connie as the woman went on, her voice in almost a whisper. "I've kept a record of it, but with the surgeries on my hip, I wasn't able to sit at my desk for very long, so I couldn't catch up on my work. My company had to lay me off. I only meant to borrow it for a while to help me get through until I could get another accounting job."

Clint straightened. "I suppose I've completed my work here." He picked up his briefcase. "I'll be going."

Connie had sure made a mess of everything. "Please." She put her hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry for my misunderstanding. My father clearly needed you here and that hasn't changed, I'm sure."

He shook his head. "This no longer feels like a good fit for me. You'll be kind enough to let your father know."

The man didn't exactly stomp out of building, but his steps on the ceramic tile floor echoed through the reception area.

Connie exchanged a glance with Mrs. Hodges as Diana Carson continued to quietly sob.

"Your father will understand." The older lady said, patting Connie's shoulder.

Connie wasn't so sure, but she led Diana back to the reception area and was helping her onto one of the couches facing the front door when Paul came toward them from the volunteer

wing.

“I’ve got something.” He waved a stack of papers. “I printed out emails that I found.”

“Emails?” Connie stood, letting Mrs. Hodges take her place on the couch. The dear woman knew Diana much better than Connie did anyway. She nudged her big brother toward the reception desk and lowered her voice. “How is that going to help us?”

He handed the stack to her and matched her almost-whisper. “Trust your own eyes.” She scanned it and halted near the bottom as the words jumped out.

Please make further payments using this link as our procedures have changed.

She read it a second time. “Where does this link go?”

“To an account at Bahama Bank and Trust.” He smiled and lifted his chin.

“Bahamas?” That was where Addison had found the accounts as well. “Let me guess – number accounts with no names attached to them.”

He gave his head a swift shake. “I couldn’t tell you that, but there are two different accounts in those emails. Some of them link to one and some to the other.”

Connie glanced toward Diana Carson. Could the woman have been responsible for this since she lost access to the accounts? It seemed reasonable, but Connie would give up any belief in her observation skills.

“Did you see the bottom?” Paul called her out of her internal condemnation. Her eyes followed his fingertip.

She glanced at the bottom of the email and went cold.

Chapter Fifteen

Answers from the Establishment

“He just left.” Connie pointed to the front door, and Paul made a dash for it.

The door opened loudly, and two police officers stepped inside. They caught Paul and spun him around.

“Wait fellas. You have this all wrong.”

“Gun.” One of the officers withdrew Paul’s Sig-Sauer from the holster he had at his back.

“If you’ll let me.” Paul struggled to hold up his right hand.

“Slow,” the other officer said as both of them kept their eyes on her brother.

He obeyed. As in slow motion, he pulled his wallet from his back pocket and showed them his badge. “I’m visiting my sister.” He pointed at Connie.

“And you were running?” The taller officer lifted an eyebrow.

Connie stepped forward. “Because the man who just left is a would-be embezzler.”

The second man hurried back to the front door. Paul, finally released, was at his heels.

Connie leaned to view through the glass wall that bordered both sides of the front door. The officer stopped just outside, but Paul ran past him. And the other man followed.

The taller man approached and caught her attention, giving Connie a hard look. “You’re certain of embezzlement?”

She showed him the copy of one of the emails. “Our accountant hasn’t been here very long, but it seems like he was attempting to have donations go into an account in the Bahamas.”

The officer peered at the page. “Clint Rutherford.” The man gave the slightest of nods.

“Do you know the name?”

He didn’t answer but pulled out a fairly shattered cellular phone and pushed a single button. “Detective Rainey, please.”

Rainey. Why did she know that name? It wasn’t like she spent time with the police force of Chicago. In fact, she’d never met any of them except for a female officer who pulled her over for speeding down I-90 last summer. Well, and the ones who had been milling around next door . . . Of course. Detective Rainey had been one of those investigating the body that was found last week.

“Why Detective Rainey?” Connie queried the officer.

“What can you tell me about this man, Clint Rutherford.” The tall man was positively pan-faced. No expression whatsoever to give her the slightest hint about what was going on.

She sighed. “Like I said, he hasn’t worked here for long. I only just met him last week. In fact, today was only the second time I’ve spoken to him.”

“And what was that about?” The man didn’t let up an inch. Not a sliver.

Connie went through the brief conversation. “But Mrs. Hodges and Miss Carson have had more opportunity to talk with him.”

Mrs. Hodges stood. “And up until now, I’ve thought quite a lot of him. She began an accolade over Clint Rutherford that sounded more like an award acceptance speech than the answers to a suspicious policeman.

Connie went to the desk as they talked and searched through the desktop computer there. Another dinosaur, as Paul put it, but then it really only had to keep track of their database. None of the graphics or complicated communications that would need a newer machine.

She scanned through the files, found an address for Clint, and printed it out along with a brief resume’ and contacts from his last job. She took it to the officer. “Here’s his address if this helps.”

“I actually already have an address for Clint Rutherford.”

Noise at the front door attracted her attention as the taller officer met his partner and Paul, struggling to bring Clint Rutherford into the building.

The man screamed curses, flailing his arms but still clinging to that briefcase. “You have no right.”

He was probably correct about that. But accumulated enough suspicion to warrant detaining him at the very least as a person of interest.

Paul wiped at a patch of blood on his lip.

“Are you all right?” Connie pulled a few tissues from a box and rushed over to him.

He stepped away and let the officers deal with the man. “His elbow caught me. I guess you can say he didn’t want to join us.”

Clint’s thrashing made the case hit the tile floor and burst open as it dangled from his fingers. Papers and packets of money fell all over the floor.

The officers succeeded in securing his hands behind his back, with him lying prone on the floor.

“Don’t touch anything,” the taller man ordered.

Connie obeyed, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t scoot closer and peruse those papers that happened to be face up.

All on the Wright Foundation letterhead. “These are hard copies of the emails you found, Paul.”

The shorter officer took one glance at the paper and stacks of money nearest him and began his normal arrest recitation, “I’m arresting you on suspicion of embezzlement, whoever you are.”

“Whoever you are?” She glanced at the taller policeman. “Why isn’t he calling him Clint Rutherford?”

The man eyed her for a long second, and she held his gaze.

Patiently.

Well, if not patiently, at least doggedly. She wasn't about to back down. It was a simple question, and she could tell that he knew the answer.

Finally, he broke the gaze and dipped his head lowering his tone. "Because Clint Rutherford is dead."

The shorter officer helped the man from the floor as other officers arrived.

"This is your fault." The man who wasn't Clint sneered in Connie's direction. "This was beautiful, perfect."

Connie gave a slight shrug. Couldn't have been that perfect if he'd been caught.

Then he smiled in a twisted sort of way. "I won't forget this pretty lady."

Connie stiffened, but she forced her expression to remain placid until he turned around and was escorted out of the door.

She sat on the edge of the couch beside Diana, feeling the blood rush from her face.

"Get her some water." Diana put her arm around Connie's shoulders as Paul raced toward the breakroom.

"I have some candy." Mrs. Hodges called out and returned from the reception desk with a bag of peanut M&Ms. Connie's favorite.

Dad came through the front door all full of fuss and feathers, demanding to know why the police were present.

Mama came straight to her and put her hand against her cheek. "You're white as a sheet. Are you all right?"

"She's had quite a scare." Diana told her what Clint Rutherford had said. Well, what the fake Clint Rutherford had said. Good thing, too. Connie couldn't have made words. And she didn't want to think about that horrible man.

Mrs. Hodges ushered Mama into a chair and moved another one nearby. "It's been quite the remarkable afternoon." While Detective Rainey explained things to Dad, Mrs. Hodges spelled out the story to mom.

"Oh dear." Her mom put a hand to her mouth as her father's volume rose.

"What do you mean the man is dead. I just spoke to him this morning." He turned to Connie. "What did you say to him to make him resign?"

Connie didn't want to relive the final communication with Mr. Pretender, but she could at least answer her father's questions. "I only asked him a few questions."

"What sort of questions?"

Mama stood between her and her father. "Mac, that's enough. Connie has had a bad scare."

Mother spoke to Dad like that occasionally, only ever in private with the family, because sometimes Dad's emotions carried him away. Her tone always shut him down.

Immediately, he appeared beside Connie. “Are you all right? He didn’t hurt you did he?”
Mama laid a hand on his shoulder. “He only threatened her.”

“But he was twisted and psychotic about it,” Mrs. Hodges added.

The words tripped across Connie’s brain again causing a fresh tremor down her spine.

Dad glanced from the police to his daughter and back again. “There’s no doubt that the dead man is Clint Rutherford?”

“None.” Detective Rainey strolled forward. “This man who has been working with you could very well have simply found the body and assumed the man’s identity.”

“No.” Connie leaned forward. His premise was horribly flawed. “Too convenient. Rutherford just happened to be an accountant which was the role Dad needed to fill? And he just happened to be here? He was probably answering the invitation to apply. Besides, how could he just happen to find the body? Wasn’t it buried under a pile of tires?”

Rainey nodded. “Much more likely, the suspect identified someone coming to apply for your position, killed him, and then stepped into the role.”

He made a motion to the other detective. “There will be evidence. And we’ll find it.” He eyed Mrs. Hodges. “In the meantime, I’ll need to collect the computer the man was using.”

Paul stepped up. “I’ll show you.” They left toward the volunteer wing.

Dad sat on the little coffee table in front of her and took her hands. “Now, Connie, you know I believe in you. But I need to know what all I’ve missed in this.”

She shrugged. “I asked him about the passwords. My email doesn’t work anymore.”

Dad nodded. “He removed all the outlying people from the accounts.”

“And you’re an outlier? ’Cause yours doesn’t work anymore either.”

“I changed my own in case it had been compromised. You know the trouble we’ve been having.”

“But that’s just it, Daddy. There is no trouble. Well, not yet.” She shared how she and Mrs. Hodges had checked in with all of the donors.

“You called the donors?” His volume rose again.

Mama leaned over and put her hand on his knee this time. “Let her talk, Mac.”

Connie explained that the donors spoke as if they were all still giving toward their pledges. “And most of them plan to continue their giving through next year.”

Mrs. Hodges stepped toward the group. “Some even plan to give more.”

“Then I don’t understand. Why has Clint reported that the donors are giving less?” Her dad rubbed a hand over his short gray hair.

Connie handed him the printouts. “Paul did a little searching through the volunteer computer.”

“You need to replace that dinosaur, Dad,” Paul chimed in as he came back into the room

and joined the group.

Connie pointed to the top document. “See, the email was sent to Mr. Gerard, asking him to use a different link for donations from here on out.”

“I . . .” Her father looked over the page. “I didn’t agree to this.”

“We didn’t think you did.” She glanced at the detective and the policemen who simply stood and watched the exchange. The shorter man took notes. To their credit, they didn’t try to take over, and they were probably getting plenty of information by their silent response.

Dad turned toward the men as well. “And you’re telling me that we’ve had a murderer in our midst for the last few months?”

“Oh.” Mama sucked in a quick breath.

The detective nodded. “That’s what it looks like.

And how close they had come to having that same murderer get away.

Chapter Sixteen

Admiration from All

Dad hired a firm to do a full audit covering the last ten years. Paul stuck around for part of the weekend to help them collect the data that would be needed for the audit.

By the time the team completed the audit the next week, the conclusions were actually pretty positive. There were inconsistencies, but they only amounted to a little over a thousand dollars.

Connie had shared the information about Diana Carson with her father at breakfast the day they got the report.

Dad nodded. "I've known about her needs. I kept thinking she'd ask me for help, even hinted at it a few times, generally speaking, you know."

She could understand his intention to not embarrass the woman.

"It also explains the check I received from her yesterday."

Connie sipped from her coffee cup. "You got a check?"

"A hundred dollars. Simply said Repayment #1 in the memo." She only borrowed six hundred, you know

Hopefully the job her dad had found for Diana at one of the charities would be a long-term solution to her needs.

Also on that day, they received a call from Detective Rainey. Mr. Pretender was actually Trevor Sandusky, who had been suspected of cons all around the Great Lakes area.

He'd admitted to the embezzlement plan, even though it hadn't worked. And the money he'd stolen had been from donations to the foundation that had been made on the trip he'd just returned from.

He would be indicted on those charges and detained without bail, and that would give the police more opportunity to find evidence that he committed the murder as well.

Connie could only hope that he was convicted of that murder or he would be free again in less than ten years. Maybe even less than five.

But she wasn't going to be one to live in fear.

The donors had to be contacted again, but this time, Dad scheduled a town hall meeting with all of them. He even invited the family to join in. Some of the donors had come in person to the warehouse that had been transformed into an auditorium. Others met with them through a video conference call.

Dad looked a little older as he waled to the podium. Instead of standing straight, he leaned heavily on it. But his voice showed the same strength as always. "I'm glad so many of you were able to attend. We will be recording this discussion, so if you have questions, please wait for a microphone to reach you. If you are on our video conference call, please send an email to the

address you received. We'll attempt to answer your questions as well.

While a couple of volunteers manned the microphones, Connie stood poised to print out emailed questions. She paused and admired her Red Hot Red fingernails that matched the skirt she'd just purchased. Yes, red was definitely going to be her color from now on. Fitting because she had helped catch a thief red-handed. She chuckled to herself.

More than two dozen people, mostly donors, had tuned in to the call. She could only see their names, but then she spotted her sister Margaret's name. Addison Chastain was also in the audience as well as PollyAnna.

Questions began to roll in, forcing Connie's attention to the printing demands and away from the conference call screen.

She trotted the first of the questions up to her father, amazed that her new stilettos were as easy to walk in as the flats she'd been using. She should have made that change years ago.

"Why don't you stay here a moment, Connie." Dad's use of her name captured her attention and actually embarrassed her a little, but she did as he asked.

He turned again toward the audience. "I know we've surprised you with this news. But I'm happy to tell you that the scoundrel was arrested and absconded with nothing as far as we can tell. He had spent the last three months worming his way into our programs and meeting some of you to build confidence in himself, but my daughter here was not fooled for a moment."

Connie's face had to be as scarlet as her skirt if the heat from her cheeks was any indication.

"While Eleanor and I attended a fundraising event, Connie reached out to trusted individuals who could advise her. Learning about more inconsistent information, she obtained help from one of our long-time volunteers."

Dad gestured to Mrs. Hodges who turned and waved like a queen.

"The two of them called many of you and learned that the reports from our accountant were completely false." Dad didn't go into the body found behind the warehouse in which they were meeting. And he didn't mention that Clint might have been a murderer, but he did go on to explain that the police were now seeking him for multiple infractions.

"As I mentioned at the beginning, none of our funds were lost to this man. And I am sure he will serve time in prison for his crime." He put his arm around Connie's shoulders and gave her a squeeze.

"That leads me to the next bit of news that I have for you."

Connie continued to wear her pleasant professional expressions, but inside her mind formed a question. Hadn't Dad already announced that she'd be taking over for Mama. Maybe he hadn't made that announcement public yet.

"As Eleanor and I reach toward our sixtieth year with the Wright Foundation, we've decided that it is the right time for both of us to resign."

A chill went down Connie's back. The professional mask dropped from her face as she studied her father.

He glanced down at her and nodded before again speaking into the microphone. "And we are convinced that the foundation will remain in good hands with our daughter Connie at the helm."

Connie froze. Then she took a deep breath and closed her mouth. It would be highly unprofessional to leave it open as if she expected to catch a fly. She swallowed, but she couldn't even paste on a smile. "You're stepping down?" Tears filled her eyes. Her father had been the soul of the foundation all of her life.

He didn't look at her, but his cheeks reddened a bit and his eyes looked misty. "We've always run the foundation by the way the Spirit led us. Many of you take part in our work here because of that very thing. And He has most assuredly confirmed that this is the right time for such a transition."

But of all her siblings, all the many long-term volunteers, why was she the one for the job?

The warehouse remained silent when Dad stopped speaking. In fact, the only sound came from the printer where one of the volunteers had taken her place to print off the questions from people on the call.

Then Nicholas Gerard, one of the most influential of their board members gestured to a young man with a microphone. He took it and stood, facing the small, raised stage where she and her father stood. "I know I can't speak for all of the donors assembled at this meeting or watching it, Mr. Wright. But I feel the need to speak my mind about this transition you have initiated. While it is important, even essential, that we take action as the Spirit urges us, perhaps the hardest thing to do is to take such action when it is so obviously not in the best interests of the people and groups that you have so dearly loved and so fully committed your time and your very lives."

Connie stiffened. Of course, there would be discontentment. Even among members of the board of directors. What had Dad been thinking?

"There is nothing about this change that seems reasonable. It is illogical and irrational to hand over such an enormous responsibility to a recent college graduate. A mere child."

With half of her wanting to cry and the other half wanting to fight, Connie could do little more than stand there like an onion being unpeeled one layer at a time. And found wanting with each new revelation.

Then the man smiled at her. "But God doesn't always do what is logical, does He?"

"Amen," someone called out.

"And we've seen you, Connie, grow up into a brilliant young woman full of wisdom and passion for the work your parents have spent their lives doing."

Tears came at that point and one escaped down her cheek. She pressed her lips together.

He redirected slightly to give his attention back to Dad. “We have always trusted your discernment, Mac. And it’s always been proved correct. Looks like your daughter has the same talent of finding the right path for this foundation.”

He turned slightly from one side to the other. “I for one, am ready to begin the next chapter with the Wright Foundation and applaud the leadership for so many years of excellence including the wisdom for when to step down.”

He handed the mic back to the volunteer, straightened and began to slowly clap.

Others joined in and the sound of the applause thundered as the entire audience stood.

Connie tucked her hand around her dad’s upper arm and laid her head against his shoulder. He patted her hand, and she noticed his eyes were moist.

How she could ever hope to lead the Wright Foundation, she had no clue. Especially once Dad and Mama truly stepped out at the beginning of next year. But they had taught her about the difference between leading and following. As long as she knew how to follow the Lord’s path, He would show her how to lead.



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