

CHAPTER 1

Pet sitting was not turning out to be an easypeasy, fun job after all. First, when my mom had said each visit would take thirty minutes tops, she hadn't factored in travel time. Even in our old van with the back bumper held on by duct tape, the trip to the Wrangleys was less than five minutes. In the wintry air with the sun going down, walking seemed to take half a day, not half an hour. By the time I arrived, I was a shuffling iceberg complete with a drippy nose and numb fingers and toes.

I jammed the key into the lock so hard my hand slipped and smacked into the side of the door.

Ouch! Even with frozen fingers, the pain made me suck on my bruised knuckle. I tried again, more carefully, wondering why Pocococo wasn't scratching at the door and whining. That was his typical modus operandi (that's detective talk for usual behavior). He had been dying to see me this morning which was the second downside to pet sitting: no matter how cute the dog, no thirteenyearold in their right mind feels like playing at 6 am. Don't get me wrong, Pocococo is the cutest Chihuahua this side of Mexico, but if the sun's not up, I shouldn't be either.

But he should be at the door at dinnertime.

Another gust of wind whipped my frizzy, shoulderlength hair into my eyes and below my nose, and I wished for the gazillionth time I had a tissue in my pocket. As I pushed open the door, a horrible thought crossed my mind, chilling it like the wind had my body.

Not another disappearing dog! Three other canines had been stolen from Oceanside Veterinary Clinic and Boarding last weekend. It was the only reason I had this paying gig; the owners were afraid to leave him at a doggy hotel. Only the promise of extra cash could motivate me to trek through the tundra of Virginia Beach.

I bet nobody mentions the Arctic windblasts of March in the tourist brochures.

I threw the door open and dashed inside, delighted to feel the warmth curl around me. I imagined I was a piece of bread in a toaster. Heavenly bliss! My elation was short lived. My heart started pounding as I became aware of the danger smack dab in front of me in the den.

A homeless man was lounging on the couch, scratching Pocococo's ears. I recoiled involuntarily, my brain trying to make sense of what my eyes were seeing.

No one should be here especially not this bum! I have to escape!

My backward motion sent one foot sliding on the throw rug that lay bunched from when I opened the door. I tried to catch my balance, tried to grab something but my frozen fingers found nothing but thin air. My numb toes were flying out from under me.

Thump!

I landed hard on the doormat on the porch, skinning an elbow. I scrambled to get up, trying desperately to decide what to do. I was torn between lingering ever so briefly to shut the door and keep Pocococo from escaping and just running for my life. My indecisiveness cost me. Pocococo was out the door in a flash.

I ran as fast as my short legs would carry me, both to catch Pocococo and to flee from the unexpected stranger. I had to remember what he looked like so I could tell the police.

Long, dark hair, unkempt. Scruffy, dark beard. Armygreen jacket and dirty jean cutoffs. Bandaged foot and leg on a pillow.

Whoa! Bandaged foot?

I slowed and whirled. No one was chasing after me and for good reason. The man was a cripple or hurt or maybe just really, really ancient.

The sound of an approaching car interrupted my agitated train of thought. Pocococo was prancing in the road, oblivious that he was directly in the path of the oncoming car. I waved and shouted to get the driver's attention as I sprinted down the middle of the street. I scooped up the excited little dog. The annoyed driver honked as he barely slowed down forcing me to leap to the curb opposite the Wrangleys house.

"Ever heard of a leash law?" snarled the driver. He punched the accelerator and sped away.

Pocococo began licking my hands and wiggling. The Chihuahua gave a couple of sharp barks and tried to climb up my jacket to wash my face.

"Shush!" I coaxed. I surveyed both sides of the street for someone, anyone. I needed to call the police and report the breakin. I thought about flagging down a car, but the only one in sight carried the irritated driver down the street at least ten over the speed limit.

My heart was still beating hard but the initial shock of the strange man, escaped dog and homicidal driver was wearing off.

"We're just going to have to get the corner store and have them place a 911 call," I confided to the dog and broke into a jog.

"Hey, I'll call the cops if you try to dognap Pocococo," shouted a rough voice behind me. Still jogging, I spared a backward glance.

"With that red hair you'll be easy to pick out of a lineup," the bum continued.

He knows Pocococo's name! How?

I stopped, turned and demanded, “Who are you and how did you get in? How do you know this is Pocococo?” I cradled the little guy protectively in my arms.

It finally registered that Pocococo had been sitting on the man’s lap, but I wasn’t taking any chances. This bum couldn’t possibly be legit. The Wrangleys would have mentioned him. My mind considered a flurry of possibilities.

He’d broken in because of the cold. Or he’d escaped from a military mental hospital on the neighboring Oceana Naval Airbase. Or he was one of the dognappers who’d been casing the Wrangleys place for the last couple days to steal Pocococo.

“I could ask you the same thing.” The man leaned on a cane and stood awkwardly in the doorway.

I noticed he wasn’t really, really old, just kind of old. Like maybe thirty or something.

“I happen to be the pet sitter, that’s who. And I have a key.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I realized I didn’t have the key. It, along with my flip-flop key ring and my own house key w still dangling on the other side of the door.

I had to get those keys. Otherwise, he might notice them, find my family’s duplex, and . . .

I swallowed. I started to perspire and, since the March weather was still lionlike, I knew it was fear that pulled the moisture from my body. A gust of the wind tugged at my hair. Pocococo whined and tried to claw his way out of my grip.

What should I do? Was the intruder linked to the three other missing dogs? Why did I ever take this job?

I could answer the last question. It had all started Monday at lunch.

CHAPTER 2

I could hear and smell the Oceanside Middle School cafeteria forty feet away. Greasy fries, old cardboard boxes and the noise of 150 seventh graders crammed into a chow hall built for economy of space, not separation of cliques, leaked into the seventhgrade hallway. Posters of cartoon fruits and veggies covered water stains and cracked paint but who cared? My peepers would be focused on Brandon, the most gorgeous green-eyed guy in the universe.

I still found it hard to believe he ate at my table five days a week. Technically, it wasn't my private little table for two or anything because my BFF Becca, Pete and Paulette sat there too. But it was Brandon that could send me into a Brance (my own private word for the trance Bran the Man put me into at least fifty-five billion times a day).

I, Gabby St. Claire, had a crush.

Brandon Coe was the coolest, the hottest and the warmest. That may sound like a contradiction in terms but it isn't. I figured he was like light, because light could be both a particle and a wave at the same time. And Bran was the light of my life.

Of course, there were a couple of complications. Just teensyweensy ones, starting with the fact that he was already taken by Pete's older sister, Lana. There was also the minor detail that my best friend had a major crush on him, too. So, at the moment, I worshipped him from afar and sat next to him at lunch.

Because I always brought my lunch, I bypassed the lunch line and headed straight to the middle section of the cafeteria where three ten-footlong tables shoved together like a barricade divided the out and in crowds. Officially, we didn't have assigned seats, but unofficially we did. It was the middleschool equivalent of a felony to infringe on another clique's territory.

I dropped into a seat and stared out the window at the wintry downpour outside. Snow and therefore snow days were rare in Virginia Beach. Too bad school administrators didn't close school for cold, dreary, freezing rain. I knew we needed it, but why couldn't precipitation schedule itself to fall between 7 and 8 a.m. when I was sound asleep?

Outside a drab gray car belched a slight figure onto the dirty gray pavement in front of our aging school. The figure dashed for the door, backpack hoisted above her head to protect her orange hair from the drizzle dropping from the steelgray clouds.

My BFFL (best friends for lunch) weaved through the crazed masses to reach our oasis of sanity as Becca listened intently to the gorgeous but unavailable Brandon. No surprises there. He could recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and Becca would hang on every word.

Becca's pixie nose and haircut were at odds with her long arms and legs. She took her seat across from me, just a little closer to Brandon on her right than she needed to be.

"Hey, guys. What's shaking?" I asked.

Brandon turned his dazzling green eyes to mine. Even after two months, his gaze could start a flush crawling up my neck and across my face. I quickly broke eye contact to look at something safer. I turned to study Pete, who picked at his mac and cheese, shoving it around with his spoon.

Becca gazed at Brandon with unabashed adoration. I made a mental note to talk to her about not being so transparently in love. The February *Teen Time* magazine my mom brought

home from work cautioned against it. She worked at McQuen's drugstore and if magazines didn't sell, she brought them home for me. Sure, the covers were torn off, and they were a month old, but they were free and full of sage advice.

"Fluffinstuff is missing," Bran said with a frown. "Lana's cocker spaniel."

I sucked in my breath. Missing was not good. I leaned forward to catch any details about the disappearing dog.

I, Gabby St. Claire, am an amateur sleuth.

"Pete will fill you in on the details." Brandon stuffed a forkful of mashed potatoes in his mouth.

Pete plunked his tray on the other side of Becca and swept his blond hair that spilled over his blue eyes back from his face. He wore a much-washed Spiderman T and faded jeans. His face was clouded over like the sky before a thunderstorm.

"Did Fluff get out of the yard?" I asked.

"No." Pete shook his head, his mouth set in a firm line. "He was being boarded at the Oceanside Vet Clinic. My family went to Richmond last weekend because Lana had another dance competition. Mom and ad didn't want my cousin watching our place because they think he's become too irresponsible. So what happens? The irresponsible clinic lost him."

"Lana cried all last night," Brandon inserted, his eyes showing worry.

"She refused to go to school today so she could look for him," Pete added.

"Your parents let her skip school to look for her dog?" Becca put down her tuna sandwich in disbelief. Her parents would likely make her attend school right after triple bypass surgery. They were that strict.

“No. They made her go, but they might as well have not bothered. She’ll cry the whole time, get sent to the office and sent home if I know my sister. She’s an actress to the core.”

“What did the clinic people have to say?” I asked.

Pete shrugged and stabbed at his mac and cheese, jerking his head at Brandon. Becca leaned ever so slightly against Brandon’s shoulder like she was having a hard time hearing. I bet even with icky cafeteria food surrounding us, she could smell his sandalwoodandleather scent, my favorite mixture. Of course, had he been more of a muskandvorysoap guy, that would have been my favorite combination.

“Get this.” Brandon dropped his voice like he was sharing a national secret. “Not just Fluff, but two other dogs disappeared from Oceanside also. There was no sign of a breakin, and no other pets were missing.”

“This guy who had his pit bull boarded there said he was going to sue them,” Pete said.

“That could put them out of business and start a downward spiral of the local, circular economy,” Becca added.

Everyone turned to stare at my BFF. Sometimes the strangest things came out of her mouth. It was like she actually paid attention in classes and applied what she was learning to real life.

Which was probably why she was a straightA student—if you didn’t count her B in pre-algebra. And no one in their right mind would count it because everyone in the entire Hampton Roads region knew that not even Einstein could get an A from Ms. Lynnet. I was lucky to be carrying a C minus in her torture chamber.

Mental note: hen you have that talk about not staring so obviously at Brandon, mention about how talking like a normal kid is a good idea, too.

“I don’t care if they do go out of business. If they can’t keep people’s pets safe, they should be shut down.” Pete was so agitated that a cheesy macaroni shot off his plate, bounced off my juice box and landed in my lap.

“Sorry.”

“No prob.” I flicked the wayward noodle onto the floor.

Just then the fifth member of our BFFL group gently set her tray to my left. Paulette Zollin’s somewhat vacant look was the only thing that detracted from her pictureperfect platinum blonde hair, expensive clothes, and classically beautiful face. Today her pale tresses were swept up and away from her face with two silver combs sparkling with red stones. Unlike most middleschool bling, Paulette wore the real thing because her parents were so rich they probably lent Bill Gates money.

Normally, hot guys and rich girls do not gravitate to fringers like Becca and me. Becca was brainy enough for the Geeks or Readers, but not me. We weren’t Jocks, Skaters, Punks or Emos. I might have hung with the Trolls since I frequently got detention for unavoidable tardies and occasionally for saying the first thing I thought of in class. But I didn’t get in serious trouble so I didn’t fit with the Mocha Locos, Goths or Heads.

It was a good thing being in a recent production of *Oklahoma* had brought us together and, much to my surprise and delight, seemed to be keeping us together because otherwise Becca and I would still be fringers.

“Pete and I are going to put up some reward signs after school. You guys want to help?”
Brandon asked.

“Absolutely,” I blurted out, jumping at an excuse to hang with Bran.

Then I mentally checked my calendar. Not that I had many pressing social engagements, but detention did factor into my plans more often than I'd like. Thankfully, I'd been on time recently.

Becca squirmed in her seat. Her face made it evident that she would willingly look for the competition's dog if it meant spending time with Bran the Man, but something was holding her back. Probably her parents. Her dad was an ex-arine who just joined the Virginia Beach olice force. To say they kept a tight rein on Becca would be like saying the ocean was a little wet. They had pulled her out of our production of *Oklahoma* over that one measly B in pre-algebra.

"Um, I'll have to meet you guys somewhere," she mumbled. "That is, if I can."

"I have Equestrian Club." Paulette sounded sincerely sorry.

I couldn't help thinking how awesome it would be to go horseback riding so often you were part of a club. Plus, if the stuff on TV was accurate, they got to wear these cute, form-fitting outfits complete with black riding helmets.

"No prob," Pete said. "Where should we meet up?"

Pete's blue eyes met mine, and I felt a little tingle run up my spine and grab my tongue. Which is the only reason I stuttered when I said, "Uhhhh?"

Could that and my quickening pulse and flushing face have anything to do with Pete's gaze? Or his smile? I noticed for the first time he had really white, really straight teeth, high cheekbones, and a rounded chin. Compared to Brandon's lithe dancer build, he was more solid.

Did he like me? Did I like him?

No way. Brandon was my crush. Even if it was my most carefully guarded secret.

"We could cover more ground on bikes," Brandon answered.

“Not with my bike,” Pete said. “It’s falling apart, but ad has no time to help me fix it because he and everyone else so busy shuttling Lana from play practice to voice class to dance.” Pete frowned.

I knew what it was like to have a parent put all their time and effort into one of your siblings. It wasn’t fun. But my situation was totally different than Pete’s.

“When I get my license, I’ll be glad to take over those duties.” Brandon smiled and arched an eyebrow.

A frown momentarily crossed Becca’s face at the mention of Lana’s name, but she quickly recovered her composure. She’d be a great actress on the Oceanside Middle School stage one day, if her parents ever allowed her to have any fun.

“You ought to meet at the vet’s. Start investigating at the scene of the crime,” she suggested.

“I don’t have a bike,” I said, “so I’ll meet you guys there.”

My parents wouldn’t know if I didn’t make it home right after school. Mom was working at McQuen’s Drugs until ten, and ad would be napping, drinking or zoned out in front of the TV.

“I will too, if I can,” Becca said without much real conviction.

“We will find Fluff and save the day.” Brandon’s confidence was infectious.

Pete sat up straighter and squared his shoulders. “We’ll end up heroes.”

Pete and Brandon thumped fists before breaking into smiles. I found myself staring at Pete’s lips just a little longer than necessary. The rest of lunch we planned out our strategy and complained about homework.

“Let’s do this, guys,” said Pete as we stood to toss our trash.

It had been a comment to everyone, but he was looking at me. His eyes lingered a fraction of a second longer than necessary on mine. Heat surged through my face, my whole body. I hoped I wasn't coming down with the flu or anything.

Because I absolutely, positively could not be attracted to Pete.