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The dealer thrust the bag in my direction, noting the tremble in my hands. I lunged forward to clasp the precious purchase. “Thank you! Thank you so much. And I’ll see you tomorrow, if not sooner.” My tennis shoes squeaked against the tile as I headed for the back door.

“Ro, we’ve had this conversation before. You’ve got to dial it back, decrease your intake. I make my living off addicts, but you need it more than most. And that’s a real problem. Not to mention, the coffee shop doesn’t open for another hour. If you weren’t my cousin...”

“But I am, and you love me!” I hoped my brilliant smile would lighten the mood.

“If I had a fancy grinder and roaster like you, I’d make my coffee every morning. But I don’t, so here we are. And there I go!” The slamming door prevented further conversation.

Marshall loved to worry. He worried about the delivery truck—would it make the predictable Thursday drop off? Or would a tornado blow it away? My cousin dug out the variables surrounding a situation, then fretted over them until...well until nothing happened. Then he’d worry about the lack of catastrophes.

Since our grandmother had passed, Marshall focused his concern on me, like one of those red laser pointers that cats adore. He meant well, but his worry rubbed against me like sandpaper. Fortunately, I had a busy day with no time for my cousin and his misplaced worry. My appointment with the lawyer was the last step to finalize Memaw’s estate and take title of her house and land.

My grandparents were the only parents I’d known, and losing them had ripped a jagged hole in my heart. They spent their golden years raising me while my parents traveled the country chasing music careers.

Most people thought little of Arthur and Etta Bergeron, including me. They’d met at a jazz club in New Orleans, and three weeks later paid a visit to my grandparents in Belle Bayou.

“Mom, Dad, this is Arthur Bergeron. He plays the saxophone like an angel! We met in New Orleans a while back, and we’ve come to ask for your blessing. We’d like to get married.”

My grandparents had coined a phrase for my mother. “Etta and the truth aren’t on a first name basis.” The truth was Etta and Arthur were already married, and expecting me. Memaw suspected that was the reason they got married, because Etta was *in the family way*. My mother denied it.

“Rose Louise, that’s simply not true! Your father and I fell in love the moment we gazed into each other’s eyes. We couldn’t wait to get married and start a family.” I was inclined to believe Memaw’s version of the truth.

Arthur and Etta hung around long enough to search through all the closets and drawers, finish off Papaw’s twenty-year-old bottle of scotch, and give birth to me at the hospital in Baton

Rouge. They borrowed Memaw's Crown Victoria to take a *much deserved honeymoon*—their words. Etta returned for Papaw's funeral twenty-nine years later, got into a fight with Memaw, and flew out the door, leaving the words, "This backwater town has nothing for me" hanging in the air. She skipped Memaw's service two years later. Everyone told me to count my blessings, and I did.

At thirty-two I had little to show for my life, but that was about to change. My plan was to lease most of the land I'd inherited to my neighbor and turn the farmhouse into a bed and breakfast. The mayor fast-tracked inspections and permits in the name of commerce. The business sign leaned in the hallway, waiting for its debut.

My coffee and I greeted Lucy LeMoine, paralegal extraordinaire and wife of my lawyer. And my best friend. "No offense, Luce, but this better be the last time I see this office for a good long while. Oh, and here's a business card for my new venture."

Lucy squinted through her black rimmed glasses as she studied the lemon-colored rectangle. Her hazel eyes reflected a serious tone.. "It's certainly, uh, bright. What does that mean, again? Cher Chien? That's French, right?" She tucked the card into her desk drawer. "You know I took Spanish in high school." She tossed her coffee colored curls and straightened the turquoise necklace around her neck. "I made straight A's, but it's nothing like French."

"Hello, Ro! How are you?" George LeMoine was my lawyer and my mayor. Many people in small towns had multiple careers. Did that make up for my lack of any? No, wait—I was a business owner. That had to count for something.

"Ro was just showing me her new business cards, sweetie. Give him one, girl!" Lucy clasped my left hand while my right thrust a card into the mayor's fingers. "George and I are incredibly proud of you, Ro. The whole town is just so excited about, uh, *Chair Chin*. Is that how you pronounce it?"

George set down his briefcase, then bent his neck to examine my card. I tried not to stare at the initial signs of hair loss. With his God-given amount of light brown hair, George's forehead took up most of the real estate on his face. The retreating hairline expanded the lot line. Yet he wore it well. Somehow the loss of hair and gain of forehead made him look even more friendly and kind. "No, honey, it's pronounced *share she-in*. That's *dear dog*, correct? Something about a place for dogs and their owners to stay, I believe." He stuffed my business venture into his shirt pocket and flashed a smile.

"That's exactly right. I got the idea from an aunt at Memaw's funeral. She couldn't keep her dog in the hotel, so she paid seventy-five dollars a night to board him. I already have two guests for this weekend. Well, two human guests and two canine ones."

George grabbed my free hand and squeezed, bringing his dark blue eyes level with my green ones. "Let me be the first to congratulate you! You are officially the owner of your grandparents' estate. Do you need any help with the sign?" He straightened his tie and picked up his briefcase. "Lucy, could you take care of that pesky paperwork? You know, getting Ro's signature on everything? I've got the health inspector coming out tomorrow for your bed and breakfast. I'm sorry, but I have to run—something about Maurice Tippin's cleaning lady finding

him unconscious. Or dead maybe, the message wasn't terribly clear on that point. Anyway, as mayor I'd better get to the hospital and sit with the family."

Lucy waved at her husband's backside. "George treats his mayoral duties more like pastoral duties. Doesn't the minister sit with the family at the hospital?" A shake of her head and Lucy moved on. "Make sure I'm saying it right, *share she-in*. Next time my mother-in-law comes, I'm sticking her with you and your dog hotel. That yappy snip of a dog drives me nuts!"

"You've mastered the pronunciation, Luce. But there's one thing, or a couple of things, I need for my new venture. I should have a dog, at least one. Don't you think?"

My best friend threw a cautious look towards me. "Ro, you know I love you. But you've never taken care of anyone or anything in your thirty-two years of life. Your grandparents spoiled you! Honey, you can't even boil an egg, or sustain a plant. I just don't know..."

Lucy switched from lecture mode, her eyebrows down and dirty, to sympathetic mode. We all preferred the kinder and gentler Lucy.

"You know what? This bed and breakfast adventure is going to be good for you. You'll learn how to cook."

Lucy took a breath. "Well, you'll learn how to cook breakfast, anyway. And why not get a pet? Merle Akins is going into a nursing home, so he's re-homing his dog. You should give him a call. Oh, and I've got a recipe for you to try."

She reached for the printer. "Here—it's fast and easy, and it's called a frittata. Now call me if you get Merle's dog."

"Well, if it ain't little Rose Louise Bergeron! How are ya'? I'm sorry I didn't make it to your grandma's funeral. I was feeling poorly that day." The lanky octogenarian standing before me wore his age well. Merle Akins kept his straw hat pointed down, to shield the sun from his face and protect his balding head. His overalls looked worn but freshly laundered. The man even had a red bandana peeking out from his side pocket. The local wagging tongues whispered that Merle's kids made the nursing home decision, not their father. They got tired of driving up from New Orleans to check on him every weekend. The shininess of Merle's eyes betrayed a broken heart.

"Hello, Mr. Merle! Yes sir, it's me. I'm sorry to hear you're leaving us for the big city." With a population of less than 1,000, Belle Bayou had no senior care facilities of any kind. We had a community center with Bingo on Saturday nights, but that was the extent of the concern for our senior citizens. Merle was joining his son and daughter-in-law in New Orleans, population pushing 400,000. Wagging tongues predicted once Mr. Akins left his beloved farm, he wouldn't live long.

"Yeah, well, it's what my kids think is best. Someone once told me after eighty, a person stops making his own decisions. I guess that someone was right." Merle pulled out his bandana and dabbed his eyes. "Anyway, what can I do ya' for? Would ya' like some coffee? Maybe some tea? I made it fresh this morning."

Twenty minutes and two glasses of tea later, I'd made an old man happy, but I wasn't any closer to my mission. "Thank you very much for the tea, and the saltines, but I'm here about your dog. Lucy LeMoine tells me you need to rehome him or her, and I'm interested."

As if on cue a medium sized dog padded toward me from the corner of the porch. "Sadie, girl, are your ears burning?" The dog stopped right beside Merle's chair and I got a better look. Her fur was mostly gray and white, but there was a good deal of old age mixed in. Her brown eyes focused on me as her tail wagged.

"What are those spots in her eyes?" Sadie's dark pupils reflected a cloudiness.

"Oh, that's just cataracts. She's pushing twelve, ain't ya' girl?" Merle scratched just behind Sadie's ears and her tail vibrated with gratitude.

"Sadie? Come here, girl." The dog inched closer to me, ears straight like a picket fence. The tips curled forward though, more like two warped fence posts. Her tail shifted into low gear but never quit.

"You like that, being scratched behind the ears?" Sadie threw her tail into high gear as her ears welcomed my touch. With my right hand maintaining petting mode I glanced at Merle.

"I'll take her, if that's okay with you. And with her too, I guess." Sadie's half-closed eyelids gave her approval.

"I think that'd be real nice. I've got her bowls, one for food and one for water. Oh, and I've still got half a bag of dog food too, but I should keep that for the other two."

My fingers tingled, but I didn't want to alienate my new friend. Maybe if I switched hands? "Uh, other two...what?"

Merle stood up. Despite Sadie's wounded eyes I followed his lead. "It's time for my pills." Sadie and I trailed behind Merle through the red screen door into the living room.

"See, my nephew bought these fancy Labrador retrievers, but he ain't got time to mess with them. He brought them over here, told me they'd be good watch dogs. They're too friendly to guard anything!" Merle stacked our glasses in the dishwasher.

"What are you going to do with them?" Sadie had already switched loyalties, and she sat under my right hand, just in case.

"Well, I reckon I'll let my son figure it out. He's the one booting me off the farm."

Sadie nudged my hand and I bent down to scratch her ears. "I'll take them too, Mr. Merle. Three dogs can't be much more effort than one."

My host faced me, arms crossed over his chest like my high school principal so many years ago. Mr. Quintal had assumed that position more times than I could count during my time at Jimmie Davis High School.

"I hope ya' know what you're doing, honey. They're sweet dogs, but they've got a lot of energy. Especially Rebel."

"Oh, we'll be fine. They'll have lots of room to run and play, and Sadie can watch them from the porch."

Merle headed for the back of the house. “That’s another thing, Sadie doesn’t really like the Labs. They got too much energy for the old gal.” We stepped through the back door of the kitchen and down the steps. My ears rang from the barking frenzy.

“Now the lighter colored one’s Ruger—he’s a silver Lab. That’s Rebel, her fur’s more rust colored, but she’s what ya’ call a chocolate Lab. They’re both a year old. My nephew was going to breed them. He paid more money than I did for my first truck and took them to the vet. That’s when he found out they’re both fixed.” Merle shook his head. “My nephew ain’t the fastest mule in the barn. Then he decided to make them hunting dogs. Ol’ Ruger’s pretty good, tracks deer like nobody’s business. But Rebel, she’s like a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. That girl can’t keep still.” More head shaking—was that for the nephew or Rebel?

“I’ll take them, Mr. Merle. No offense to your son, but I don’t think they’d be in good hands.” Both Labrador Retrievers leaped at the fence and barked their greetings. The wagging tails conveyed their eagerness to meet me.

“Shall I? Open the gate, that is. We might as well get it over with.” My head nodded, but my brain prepared to run.

Rebel leaped over Ruger and hit me in the chest. Thanks to Merle’s warnings, I teetered backward but caught myself. Sadie was nowhere to be found. Ruger joined his friend in their attempt to knock me horizontal.

“Get down! Get down!” Merle shut the gate. “They don’t listen worth squat. Ya’ sure you want these two hellions, Rose Louise?”

My jaw dropped in preparation to decline the additional dogs, then returned to neutral position. The dogs leaped with joy, free of their cage and grateful to the hero who rescued them. Rebel broke from Ruger and trotted over to me, placing the side of her head against my leg. My fingertips touched the silky fur and Rebel twisted her head to stare at me. Her brown eyes reminded me of Memaw.

“Yes, I’ll take them both. We’ll be fine, won’t we guys?” My question hung in the air like a pungent odor. Merle shook his head and the Labs rolled in the dirt. “Bring your truck around, and we’ll just open the door and see what happens. You don’t have a back seat, do you? I’ll say a prayer for you tonight. Tomorrow too, I think.”

Rebel continued to roll, her fur more dirt colored than rust. Ruger chewed on...what was that? I spotted gravel on the ground. Apparently my new dog enjoyed gnawing on rocks.

Merle shook his head again—the poor man would have a headache soon. “Honey, I’m just going to put ya’ in my prayers all month long.”

A fifteen-minute truck ride feeling like an hour brought us home. We pulled into the driveway and I reflected on my last conversation with Merle. He’d issued a few warnings.

“Those Labs will eat anything, even stuff no normal animal will eat.” That explained Ruger’s love of rocks. “What they don’t eat, they destroy. Rebel can twist door knobs too, so

keep your doors locked all the time. If the Labs get out don't worry—they'll come back, eventually."

Merle's instructions poured through my brain. "Ruger likes to chew on things, so if ya' got anything of value, ya' better lock it away. Until they're at least three, maybe four years old."

"All right, dogs! Let's go inside your new home!" I attempted to herd my pets through the front gate. "No, follow me." *Please, Lord, herd these dogs for me. Merle didn't have any leashes, and I was afraid to leave the Labs in the car while I stopped to buy some.* I maneuvered the truck within inches of the front gate, then slipped out to open the passenger side. The door creaked with anticipation as I opened it.

The Labs leaped past the door and through the gate, circling the yard with yelps of joy. Sadie jumped from the truck and glued herself to my right leg. We stepped into the yard and I closed the gate. I headed up the stairs to the front porch and my new roommates followed. All I had to do was open the door to the house and—

Whoops! The latch on the lock hadn't caught, and Rebel's front legs pushed the door open. I leaped up the front steps to keep up. "Stay down here, dogs! Don't go—"

Crash! I took the wooden stairs two at a time, my Sadie shadow not quite so quick. She reached the landing a few seconds later, right after my cry. Memaw's thrift store lamp sprawled across the blue and yellow rug like a murdered corpse. Rebel's tail bounced up and down, incredibly proud of her accomplishment.

"Rebel, no! Bad girl." The spring in her tail kicked into mania mode. "No, I'm not praising you, I'm scolding you. No, bad girl." The trail of dirt caught my eye. Why hadn't I rinsed off the Labs before letting them in the house? Maybe Lucy was right—I had no business owning a dog, and definitely not three.

I pronounced the lamp's time of death at 10:07 a.m. "C'mon, guys, it's bath time." Labrador Retrievers loved water, right?

Not my Labs, and definitely not Sadie. I regrouped to form a new plan of attack. Sadie's fur appeared to be clean in its natural state, so I gave her a pass. The other two couldn't deny their need for soap and water.

The water hose! I sprinted to the backyard, shampoo in hand and Labs jostling for the lead. I got to the faucet first and gave it a quick twist, patting myself on the back for my win. When I turned toward the coil of green plastic tubing, I caught my rookie mistake. The Labs had no interest in the faucet—their intended target all along was the hose.

Rebel clutched the metal nozzle in her jaws, flinging water about like glitter. Cold, wet glitter.

Was I smarter than a Labrador Retriever? I'd started the morning believing that statement, but Rebel proved me wrong. We played tug of war for a good three seconds before Ruger joined in the fun. Of course he chose the Lab side, the traitor.

At last, I wrestled the hose from both dogs and turned the water on my intended targets. The pure joy created by rolling in dirt paled in comparison to the blissful experience of galloping in circles while pelted with water. To my dogs anyway.

“Ugh! Thanks to you two I’m drenched, and I already had my shower this morning.” Soaping and rinsing left me wetter than, well, wetter than my dogs.

But how to dry them off? Should I bring damp animals into the house, or risk leaving them outside while I grab bath towels? *Memaw, if you’re looking down, please forgive me. Let me get the dogs dry first, then I’ll mop up the water on the floor.*

Rebel leaped on the couch. *And the furniture, too, Memaw. I promise!*

“Get off! No, stay here, on the floor.” My grandmother’s chocolate eyes looked into my soul, and the dog obeyed. “Good girl, good girl, Rebel. Whoever named you definitely got it right.” Ruger sank to the floor and licked his paws. Sadie peeked into the room, visibly relieved the word *bath* had disappeared from the conversation.

Lucy’s name appeared on my phone screen. “Retired math teacher dead from prescription drug overdose—homicide not ruled out!” My best friend always had a flair for opening lines. She had been the editor of our school newspaper, so she’d had lots of practice.

“Hello, Lucy. I’m guessing Mr. Tippin is the dead math teacher? I’ll never forget that man! He almost flunked me in Algebra I—who even needs algebra, anyway?” My memories of all things math were dark and dreary, like an Edgar Allen Poe story.

“Ro, have some respect for the dead, and the next of kin too! Poor Mrs. Tippin. Remember her English class? She always made it so fun. And she taught my newspaper and yearbook classes, too. Oh, I just loved her.”

I plopped on the couch. “Doesn’t—I mean, didn’t Mr. Tippin have a brother? He works at Progressive National, right?” Our one bank had one teller and a manager, Beauregard never advanced beyond the drive thru. “Yeah, the guy with sandy blonde hair, always needing a haircut. He wears those Benjamin Franklin glasses to hide those watery eyes, and he always looks like someone just yelled at him. Every time I go in there he messes up my deposit.”

Lucy ignored me. “Oh, the Tippins had such a lovely marriage. And the brothers got along so well, just like Lily and me.”

A snort escaped my nostrils. “Are you kidding me? When you and your sister are on speaking terms, you’re screaming at each other.” As an only child I’d wished for a sister to play with. In third grade I met Lucy and Lily. Those two shot my dream out of the sky like a sidewinder missile.

The sniff on the other end confirmed Lucy’s irritation. “I don’t know about that. This morning we texted each other and it was a lovely conversation. At any rate, Beauregard and Maurice got along quite well. I can’t believe anyone would want to kill him.”

“You said homicide’s not ruled out. That means we don’t know for sure Mr. Tip—I mean, Maurice was murdered.” I still got a little weirded out when I spotted former teachers at the grocery store or in town. And I’d never felt comfortable calling them by their first names. Maurice Tippin would forever be Mr. Tip Over.

“Didn’t we have a nickname for Maurice? Because he was overweight?” In the law firm, Lucy worked with people who’d known her as a little girl. She’d mastered the skill of calling authority figures by their first name long ago.

“We called him *Mr. Tip Over*, because his stomach was so large he could tip over at any moment. He lost about a hundred pounds though, when he retired. Last week I saw him at the bank and he was a healthy weight.”

Lucy’s chuckles drifted through my cell phone. “That’s right, Mr. Tip Over! Gosh, we were so mean in high school! Well it turns out, he was taking Acebutolol for high blood pressure and an erratic heartbeat. There’ve been a lot of overdose cases, but the sheriff’s office is going to launch a thorough investigation just in case. Anyway, Ro, I’ve got to go—George can’t help with your sign today, not with a death in our community. But he’s sending Marshall. And don’t worry—Marshall’s bringing coffee.”