

*Alexandra Mackenzie and her new husband, Chief of Police, Andrew Marlow, attempt to solve several mysteries in their town and their two dogs and two cats jump into the fray to help.*

## **DIGGING FOR CLUES**

By Donna B. MacDonald

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Donna B. MacDonald



# Digging for Clues

Murder in a small New England town



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## THE CHARACTERS

Alexandra (Alex) Mackenzie Marlow - former Pinkerton detective, runs Mackenzie Investigations. Helps police from time to time.

Andrew Marlow - married to Alex. Becomes Chief of Mackenzie Falls police.

Julie Mackenzie - Alex's mother. Lives in half of the big house. Retired psychologist.

Peggy Marlow - Andy's mother. Thinking of moving closer.

Gwen Bryce - Alex's best friend, owns the animal shelter.

Eugenie Bryce - Gwen's mother, lives with her.

Beatrice (Bea) Henry - best friend of Eugenie. Lives with Gwen, Eugenie, and Tamika.

Tamika - is being adopted by Gwen. Changes her name to Mattie Bryce. She's on the school newspaper.

Louise Harris - Tamika's birth mother.

Matthew (Matt) Shannon - Tamika's birth father.

Ronnie Gilchrist - Gwen's former boyfriend.  
Vince Miralles' business partner.

Vince Miralles - Vince and Ronnie own Boston Souvenirs together but they are importing more than souvenirs.

Lanie Miralles - Vince's wife, Michael's mother.

Cathy Gillem - Vince Miralle's secretary.

Lorenzo Lamotta - an unhappy customer of Vince and Ronnie.

The high school kids on the school newspaper:

Riley O'Brien

Michael Miralles - her boyfriend

Tamika Harris

Frankie Courtland - her boyfriend

Annie

Chris - her boyfriend

The Police Station crew:

Harry Upton - Deputy Chief and best friend to Andy; called the Silver Fox - he's seventy years old

Tony Messer - lieutenant, partner to Cindy

Cindy Diaz - sergeant, Tony's partner

Zoe Porter - head of computer division

Gus - head of crime scene analysis

Charlie Thomas - Andy's new secretary

The Four-Footed Characters:

Alex's furry four-footed family:

Bootsie - part Bernese mountain doggie; has search and rescue training

BamBam - black wire-haired Scoodle (part miniature poodle, part Scottish terrier; trained to find drugs

Lucy - white haired kitty cat

Simon - gray MaineCoon kitty cat

Teddy (formerly Zeus) black Labrador puppy belongs now to Gwen

*Digging For Clues*

Gracie - orange and white tiger kitty cat belongs to Julie



DIGGING FOR CLUES is the third book in a series. I call it the Mackenzie Falls Mysteries.

Mackenzie Falls is a small New England town founded by Alexandra Mackenzie's ancestors.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Tuesday, December 9<sup>th</sup>*

*Sixteen days to Christmas*

The frigid air began seeping into the car the moment she shut off the engine. BamBam hopped off her shoulders down onto her lap. The black Scoodle looked up at her expectantly.

“Ok, BamBam. This is it. Your last evaluation before you get certified. You still want to do it, little guy?”

With his back feet on the seat between her legs, he stretched up to where he could give her face a lap.

Just then the wind blew an especially blustery gust right through the van, making her shiver. Alex knew that before long little BamBam would start shivering, too. But rather than dressing him in his little doggie coat, she picked him up and tucked him inside her winter jacket. Only his little head poked out.

As soon as she reached for the car door handle her cell phone rang. Turning her body in her

bulky parka, Alex grabbed the phone from the outside pocket of her backpack. In the meantime, BamBam started wiggling to get out of her jacket.

“Hey Gwen. What’s up? BamBam and I are just about to get out of the car.”

“I need your help!”

“Whoa, Gwen, what’s wrong?” It was so unusual to hear her best friend freaking out, that Alex suddenly went into full alert.

“Oh, Alex. I’ve really screwed up. I don’t know how to fix it.”

“What’s this about and can it wait until after BamBam’s test – which is about to start in a few minutes, by the way.”

“Sorry. I forgot. Shows you how rattled I am. I can be there in five minutes. Bye.”

“Wait? What?” But Gwen had turned off her phone.

Alex looked down at a puzzled BamBam staring at her.

“You got me, Bam. I have no idea what has gotten into Gwen. Anyway, you and I have a date right inside that building. Let’s go.” Again,

she stuffed the Scoodle back inside her big down parka. The dog's little brown eyes, poking up, were barely visible from inside the dark navy jacket.

Grabbing her backpack, Alex stepped down onto the snow-covered parking lot. When Alex looked up at the gunmetal sky, she said to BamBam, "It doesn't take a meteorologist to know it's about to start snowing." The doggie pushed his head against her chest, glad for the warmth of the jacket pulled around his tiny body. Alex walked carefully through the icy lot up to the front door of the partially finished gym.

Today their destination was the newly finished locker room. The owners were gracious enough to allow the use of their lockers for testing the dogs' drug sniffing ability one last time before their certification.

Over the past six weeks BamBam had surpassed every expectation. The instructor had been hesitant to allow Alex and her little dog, who reached no more than 15 inches at his full height, to be part of the training program. He thought BamBam was just too short and small to be able to do the job properly. Over the six-week course BamBam showed him the

advantages of being little and just how good he could be at his new work.

The instructor, Tom Santos, had come a long way. Today he had every expectation that BamBam would finish in fine style – so much so that he had the certificate all filled out and ready to hand to Alex at the end.

She was sorry that Andy couldn't come with them for this final leg of their journey, but he was stuck back at the station – some meeting with Chief Logan. Alex knew she'd hear all about it later. But then Gwen, her best friend, bailed on her, too. Except now it looked like she was going to show up late. Alex just hoped it didn't disturb BamBam during his test.

She knew that they had to be able to tune out all distractions in their drug sniffing work, but Alex thought it might be harder to do if the distraction happens to be your "Mom's" best friend.

Alex found it curious that Gwen, unflappable Gwen, appeared to be a nervous wreck all last week and apparently the unknown malady continued into this week. She told Alex she couldn't attend because there was too much to do before tomorrow when Gwen was due in court. It was the final hearing in the adoption

process. This time tomorrow, Alex mused, Gwen would officially become Tamika's mother. But that didn't seem reason enough for Gwen to go off the deep end. Alex knew something else was bugging her BFF but it would have to wait until after this final test.

The facility was set to have its grand opening next weekend. They were lucky that the gym manager had agreed to turn on the heat for them.

For this last test, there were six dogs who would be taking part, two dogs at a time. Each pair had a specific time slot and Alex and BamBam were to start at two p.m. When she got inside, Alex checked her watch. Five minutes early. Shedding her jacket and backpack, Alex looked around to see who their competitor would be.

A black lab lay at the feet of a hulking guy with piercing black eyes and a nasty sneer. The scar vertically marring his right cheek added to the rough picture of an unsavory character. Alex didn't like the look of him, and she got angry when she observed the lab's demeanor. The poor dog was practically cowering. As soon as this test was over, Alex would have a talk with the instructor. No way should that man even

own a dog. How on earth did the instructor not see what was going on?

It turns out that the instructor noticed Alex watching the handler with his dog, Zeus. He took a moment to pull Alex aside.

Before he spoke with her, however, he leaned down to pet BamBam and wish him well on his final exam, he called it.

“Alex, I can tell by your look that you have taken a dislike to Mark.”

“Tommy, take one look at Zeus, really look. You see his fear?”

“Yeah, I do. And I will be watching very closely, believe me. Mark has connections unfortunately and convinced someone to let him “re-certify” his dog by doing just this one test. Otherwise we would have picked up at the beginning of training on his bad treatment of the dog. I’ve already called Judy at animal control to come and take the dog from him when we’re finished. I’ll have an investigation started right away. I hope we can get him charged with neglect, or something, so he can’t have Zeus or any other animal.”

“Thank goodness,” Alex said.

“We’ll be starting in just a moment. Are you two ready?”

BamBam was sitting quietly at Alex’s feet looking back and forth between them. As their voices were not raised, BamBam assumed all was well.

“We are,” she answered, looking down at him.

At the last minute, Alex remembered to turn off her cell phone.

Just as Tom began his instructions, though, the door flew open and in walked Gwen.

Alex did a double-take. Her best friend was so frazzled she looked like the hound of the Baskervilles was about to attack.

Seeing Tommy, Gwen stuck a smile on her face, shuffled up to him in her winter boots, and pulled him into a big hug.

“It’s been a long time, Tommy. How are you?”

“Great, and you, Gwen?”

“Good, good, thanks.”

“To what do we owe the honor?”



“I came to watch BamBam earn his certificate. He was one of my rescues, you know. I love our success stories.”

Gwen owns the Mackenzie Falls Animal Shelter and that’s where Alex adopted her cats and dogs.

“Okay, then.”

They stood at the opening to the long corridor. Stretched out before them were rows of empty lockers – some tall, skinny ones appropriate for hanging a suit, other lockers were small, just big enough for a gym bag. Drugs had been placed in one locker on each side. Some of the other lockers held candy, various snacks and other items, all red herrings. The point was to see if the dogs could focus on just finding the drugs. The handlers did not know which locker contained the drugs so in this way they could not influence the dogs’ behavior. They were simply to take their respective dog down the row until they found the locker containing the drugs.

The tall guy leading the black lab, Zeus, looked over at his counterpart opposite him and burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Alex asked, although she knew the answer. This was BamBam’s last test

to earn his drug finding certification. Every step of the way she and her little Scoodle had been ridiculed and laughed at due to his little stature. With his head held high, BamBam topped out at fifteen inches. But what he lacked in height, he more than made up for with the best sniffer going.

“That black little mutt is no match for my Labrador.”

“I guess we’ll see, won’t we,” Alex calmly replied.

They both looked at the judge.

“Name calling isn’t productive,” he warned. “Most times you will be working with a team of other dogs and handlers, you best remember that. We’re judging not just how the dog performs but also how the handler gets along with the team and how he or she works in the field and with others. So, let’s get going.” Tom, the judge, was a short man with a large belly and a sweet, round face. Despite his casual manner, Tommy was fiercely protective of his four-legged clients. Alex liked that about him.

During all this, BamBam had sat dutifully beside her, waiting for a command.

Finally, Tommy finished his instructions and said the magic word, "GO!"

And they were off.

If he had one drawback to his stature it would be that his short legs kept him a couple steps behind his competitor. However, BamBam's nose truly was remarkable. Within four seconds he had found an area he was interested in. He sat down in front of a column of lockers.

He didn't "mark" the bottom locker, so Alex picked him up, letting him sniff each one in the column. At the next to the top locker BamBam went into action, banging his paws against the locker door.

Two seconds later, the Labrador also indicated a "find."

Reaching into the locker BamBam chose, the judge pulled out a baggie containing an ounce of heroin.

Two seconds later the Labrador also found his bag.

Gwen was clapping, and Alex was shouting, "good dog," to BamBam, so it took a moment to register the sound of canine distress over their own jubilant noise.

Quickly turning to the source, Alex was appalled and angry to see Mark had thrown a choke collar around Zeus' neck and had it pulled so tight he was actually lifting the front of the dog off of the floor, hence the poor boy was strangling.

Alex, flying into a rage, threw her body at Mark, slamming him against the lockers so hard that he let go of the collar. Immediately Gwen and Tommy took the dog away from him, leading Zeus to a place down the hall a safe distance, where they soothed the shaking doggie.

Mark, gathering his energy, suddenly launched himself at Alex, a move she had been anticipating. From observation she knew he was right-handed and the attack would be that side of his body. So as soon as he committed, she jumped to the right, out of his range. Wondering what happened, he turned around back to her, angrier than before.

But Alex didn't wait, she used the flat of her hand to smash his nose and as he put his hands up to his face to staunch the flow of blood, Alex shoved her knee up into his crotch with all her might. And with that, the abuser collapsed to the floor in agony.

Fortunately, Judy, the animal control officer, arrived in time to see the whole incident. When Alex took him down, Judy raised her hands to clap, but managed to stop herself in time. As the animal control officer, she wasn't allowed to applaud "take downs" of perpetrators. She turned to Tommy and Gwen who happily filled her in, describing the man's abusive actions toward the dog since his arrival.

Mark was still moaning. BamBam, who had placed himself quite near Mark's neck, growled threateningly at the monster on the floor.

Judy pulled her gun, leveled it at him and announced, "You are under arrest for animal cruelty." She then called for a patrol unit, the actual ones who would escort him to the station.

For the next twenty minutes the officer interviewed each one, taking their statements. He also took pictures of Zeus, who was still shaking, and a close-up of the choke collar.

Judy said she was taking Zeus to the vet to be checked out.

"If he's all right and doesn't have to stay at the vet, can I take him to my house?" Gwen said. "I can take care of him until the trial or whatever. In fact, will they let me adopt him?"

Alex was surprised to hear Gwen offer. Even though she ran the shelter, she had never taken a dog home with her, just cats. Apparently, Gwen felt a strong bond with this animal as she continued to lightly soothe his throat and neck.

“Of course you can, as far as I’m concerned. You’ll have to appear in court and speak to the judge about it, though.”

Gwen nodded.

Then Tommy announced, “I have some news here, ladies. BamBam and Zeus both passed their tests and are now certified official drug-sniffing investigators. What do I do with Zeus’ certificate?”

Judy said to give it to Gwen.

And that was it. BamBam passed with flying colors.

“Look at you!” Gwen exclaimed to Alex. “That monster didn’t land one finger on you, did he?”

“Nope. I didn’t give him the chance. My anger took over and I just followed.”

Alex bent down to pat Zeus. She could feel his body shaking still. “Oh honey, you’re safe now,” she whispered into his ear. “I promise you from

now on you'll get all the love you deserve and more. Okay, sweetie?"

Zeus lifted his head for the first time and Alex felt his eyes penetrating into hers.

She nodded, and simply said, "Yes, you're safe now. I promise."

## CHAPTER TWO

When they got out to the parking lot, Gwen touched Alex's arm to stop her for a minute.

"You're coming over now, aren't you?"

Alex could hear the desperation in her friend's voice.

"I have to run home with BamBam, and let Bootsie out, too. And check on messages from Andy. Then I will be right over. Forty-five minutes, maybe?"

"Okay, that will give me time to stop at the vet and check on Zeus. Judy texted me a few minutes ago that he went in willingly. In fact, she said his whole demeanor was down. Almost like he didn't care what happened. It breaks my heart to see an animal that has been treated so badly it .... I don't know."

Gwen was trying to hold back the tears, but Alex knew her best friend so well.

"He's going to be okay now, Gwen. You'll see. It's a good idea for you to stop by. He just needs to feel loved until he learns to trust again. You two are going to make a great pair."



Gwen wiped her eyes. A tiny smile appeared.

Finally, she nodded slightly. “Then I’ll meet you back at my house in forty-five minutes. I really need to speak with you before Tamika gets home from school.”

“It’s well after school now.”

“She and her friends are on the school newspaper and Tuesday is the day they get together every week to go over their articles and ideas and things.”

“Good for her. That sounds great.”

“Her boyfriend, Frankie, is part of the team.”

“Oh right, Frankie is her first real boyfriend, isn’t he.”

“Yes. They’ve been dating since the beginning of the school year. We better hurry so we can have enough time before Tam gets home.”

“I’ll be there, Gwen.” Alex reached over to give her friend a hug. BamBam snuggled inside her jacket, objected loudly as he got squished between them. Squirming, he freed himself partway out of her coat.

“Whoa, Bam. We’ll be home shortly.”

“What’s the matter boy?” Gwen said, laughing. “You’ve got the warmest place there is.” She couldn’t resist ruffling the fur on his tiny head that was sticking up.

With that they parted.

Gwen, thinking of Zeus on her drive to the vet, said, “That name. It will have to change. He doesn’t need a reminder of his life under that name.” She spent the short ride over, thinking about names to suit the loving, sweet pup.

All of Gwen’s animals at the shelter get a check with Dr. Vessario, the vet. He’s good and he’s compassionate. And he gives Gwen a good discount on all vet expenses.

“Hey Gwen!” he called to her as she walked in the door. “I understand you’re adding a new member to your family.”

“Yes. Isn’t he a great dog? Is he all right?”

“The answer is yes to both. Come on back and I’ll show you.”

She followed him out back into one of the exam rooms where a vet technician stood next to the table where a quiet Zeus lay still. He didn’t even raise his head when they entered.

“Hey, baby,” Gwen called to him. At the sound of her voice, Zeus lifted his black head and tracked her movements with his eyes as she came around to him.

She spoke quietly a few minutes with him and simply laid her hand close to his face. The dog kept looking up at her. Finally, he moved his head a little so he could lap her hand. Even that effort seemed to tire him as his head plopped down onto the exam table.

Gwen looked at the vet with inquiring eyes.

“It’s all right,” he reassured her. “It’s like with humans, too. You go through some horrific experience, then suddenly you’re thrust into a different environment. Your body feels like it can’t take much more, so rather than figuring out this new thing that’s happened, you just shut down for a bit until your mind and body are ready to deal with something new. Make sense?”

“I guess. Are you sure? Maybe he’s in pain.”

“Zeus, ...” but before he could continue, Gwen interrupted him.

“Sorry to interrupt Jim, but could you change his records right now to reflect his new name? It’s Teddy. Because he’s such a loving Teddy bear.”

As she said it, Gwen bent down and lovingly, softly caressed the dog's head.

They all were watching so they all saw the dog take a deep breath and let it out slowly. His whole body relaxed. The demeanor on his face changed immediately. Slowly he moved his head over to where her hand rested on the table, and simply put his head down on top of it.

"Wow," the tech exclaimed. "You two are definitely meant for each other."

"I agree," Jim, the vet said. He instructed the tech to fix the records tonight before they close up.

"So, I think that Teddy's neck is sore, but he certainly has Alex to thank for getting that guy to let go of the leash as quickly as she did. Judy told me about it. He could have snapped the dog's neck. Good thing he isn't here right now, I'd probably try to snap his. You better come take a look at his x-rays."

They went over to the light box where Jim pointed out a partially healed broken rib.

"He may be feeling that still. It looks to be a week old maybe. He's young. I'd say 18 months' old perhaps? I can see a few other older wounds that have healed. I'm

documenting everything and adding pictures to a file that I plan to present at the guy's hearing."

"I hope to God they listen, Jim. Rarely does one of these guys get jail time. The laws on the books say up to seven years imprisonment for animal cruelty - but no one ever gets anywhere near that amount of incarceration. Also states a large fine. One thing seems to be constant and that they usually rule that the guilty party can never own another animal. So, at the very least we can stop him from hurting another helpless creature. I hope."

"You and me both."

After they walked back to the table, he continued, "You know there is no reason why Teddy can't go home with you now. I'll be getting more blood results back tomorrow and I can call you with those."

"What? Seriously? Now?"

"Yes! You do want to, don't you?"

"Yes, of course. But I don't have any food or a bed yet for him or toys, or..."

Jim gently laid his hand on her arm. "Slow down. It's okay. What Teddy needs most of all right now is love, not a night in a cold, strange

cage. You can stop on the way home for the basics like food, dishes and whatever. That will be enough.” He went on to tell her which foods to buy and how much.

Gwen nodded but then turned to Teddy.

“What do you think, boy. Do you want to come home with me now?”

Thump went the tail.

“There’s a number of people that live at home. You’ll have to get used to that.”

He looked up at her questioningly.

“Well, there’s my mother and our friend, Bea Henry, a very nice elderly lady. Um, then there’s Tamika – you’ll like her, she’s young and has lots of energy, like you.”

Teddy made like he was ready to get down off the table. As far as he was concerned, “home” sounded mighty good.

## CHAPTER THREE

By the time Gwen had stopped at the pet store, loaded up with dog food, a large doggie bed, powder blue because Teddy's black fur looked so gorgeous against it, a leash and harness, dog dishes, tennis balls, dog biscuits, a bright red bandana, outlined in white fur and reading, "Merry Christmas," after all, Christmas was only three weeks away, and a toy that he picked out himself – a stuffed teddy bear! – it was four o'clock when she pulled into the driveway at home. It was then Gwen realized she had completely forgotten to call her Mom to let her know a new member of the family had suddenly arrived.

"Oh boy, Teddy. Now what? You know, I'm fifty-five years old, but she's still my mother. What do you think, boy? Should I call her now or should we just make an entrance?"

"Woof!" he exclaimed, standing up on the seat waiting for the door to open.

"Okay, surprise it is." Gwen came around to his side of the car and helped him out. She was trying to keep his head and neck as stable as possible, while watching out for his rib.

He was wearing his new red harness and looked quite smart. She knew he could use a bath, but Dr. Jim said wait a few days. He didn't need any more trauma just yet.

"Hello!" Gwen shouted, walking into the foyer. She held Teddy's leash while they walked down the hall to the kitchen. It was a safe bet that Mom and Bea Henry were at work in the kitchen baking up food for tomorrow's celebratory dinner being held after the final adoption proceeding.

Both elderly women looked up from their tasks when they heard a clicking noise. Sure enough, Teddy's nails made a noise as he walked along the wooden hallway floor.

"Hi everybody!" Gwen shouted a little too loudly. She had no idea if Teddy could follow any commands, but she decided to try one. "Sit."

Like a gentleman he immediately sat down next to her.

"Mom, Bea, I'd like you to meet Teddy. In his short life he has been horribly abused and badly needs a loving home. I decided it should be our home where he can find love and can recuperate from his many injuries. What do you say?"



Eugenie Bryce put down her dish drying towel and walked over to stand in front of the dog.

Teddy looked up at her and on his own he offered her his paw.

“Oh, you sweetheart!” she exclaimed. Bending down she slowly took the paw in her hand and told him how good it was to meet him.

“Teddy, our home is now your home, baby.” When she looked up at her daughter, Eugenie was visibly upset.

Gwen was totally caught off guard seeing her mother on the verge of tears.

“Mom, you okay?”

“Yes, dear. I can’t stand the thought of defenseless animals or children being harmed by human monsters. I hope the man responsible is going to serve some time incarcerated for his heinous behavior.”

“There are several of us, including Dr. Vessario, who are going to do our very best to see if we can make that happen.”

“Good.”

In the meantime, Bea had come over. That reminded Gwen that Bea's cat, Muzzy, was bound to be around somewhere.

"Bea, I have no idea yet if Teddy has had any interaction with cats. Do you think you could corral Muzzy into your room for a while? We'll figure that out soon, I promise."

After getting to pat the doggie, Bea went in search of the cat.

Gwen said she had to go bring in a whole car full of dog supplies, so Eugenie said she'd watch Teddy while she did that. Luckily as Gwen was grabbing bags and so forth out of the car, Alex drove up. Between the two of them they made quick work of it.

Back inside, though, Gwen realized she made a mistake.

"What?" Alex asked.

"I should have bought two beds, one for upstairs and one for down."

"Yup, you definitely need two. You can pick it up tomorrow. By then you'll probably have a list of many things you hadn't thought of that you'll need."

After a few minutes, the girls excused themselves to go upstairs. Naturally, Teddy followed Gwen.

“You mentioned something about the attic,” Alex said. “Are we going up there?”

“Nope. I brought the stuff down to my bedroom, so we could look at it a little more comfortably.”

Gwen had a large master bedroom that included a sitting area in front of a bow window. She had a table and two chairs in front of the window which is where they now sat.

She turned her head to look for Teddy, but he was still standing in the doorway.

“I wonder what's wrong?” Gwen said.

“More than likely his former owner didn't allow him into the bedroom, so he's scared. The poor doggie is so afraid of getting hit or abused if he does the wrong thing.”

Gwen jumped up out of her chair which prompted Alex to remind her to make her movements slow and easy, nothing sudden as that would further frighten the traumatized dog.

Slowly Gwen walked over to him and bent down to his level.

“Hi sweetheart.”

He looked up questioningly, his eyes pleading to know what to do. 'It's okay, boy," she said, lightly rubbing his head and neck.

“This is now your bedroom, too. I want you to come in and join us. It's okay.”

Gwen patted the side of her leg as a signal for him to come with her. Teddy took a few “test” steps to make sure he was understanding her correctly. He didn't want to get her mad at him, he loved Gwen already and would do anything to please her. After a few steps he looked up at her, but she continued to walk. He whined very softly.

Realizing she should have kept walking with him, Gwen again went back to him, reassuringly patting him and talking softly. “Let's go join Alex.”

With further coaxing they finally made it to the little nook where Gwen sat at the table and asked Teddy to sit which he happily did. A few more loving pats, then Gwen said, “Lie down, now.”

Oh good, Teddy knew that one too. Sighing he happily laid down by her chair. The thick soft rug

felt wonderful on his aching body. In less than a minute Teddy fell into a deep, lovely sleep.

“You’ve got the hang of it, now, Gwen. That puppy will be your champion for life.”

“I’m the lucky one, he’s helping me through a tough time.”

In a moment the gals turned to the task at hand.

Alex saw what looked like a stack of letters and some photos laid out on the table.

With a big sigh, Gwen began.

“I don’t remember how much I’ve told you about Tamika or her family.”

Rather than answer, Alex decided to just let her friend talk.

“When she was twelve years old her parents separated. I met Matthew Shannon, Tam’s father, about a month after their separation.”

“Wait, I thought Tam’s last name was Harris.”

“Well, that’s jumping ahead a bit, but after they got divorced, Louise decided to take back her maiden name and she also changed the two children’s last name to hers. She wanted to obliterate everything that had anything to do with their father, Matthew.”

“Wow. Okay, go on.”

“Neither one of us meant this to happen but...”  
Gwen had so many emotions wafting through her brain that she was having trouble gathering the right words to say.

“Go on, Gwen. I’m your best friend. You know I would never, ever judge you. Just tell me what happened.”

“We fell in love,” she answered softly.

With that Gwen picked up a photo and showed it to her.

“That’s Matt and me at a restaurant on the Cape. A waitress took our picture.”

Alex took it from her. She was surprised to feel a bit of wetness trickle into her eyes. What Alex saw in that picture was two people so happy and in love that no one could possibly miss the beautiful love between them. Then she noticed something else.

“I guess I didn’t realize that Tam’s father was white. It explains how she ended up nearly passing for white while her brother is quite dark like her mother.”

‘That’s exactly so. It was another reason Tam felt more at ease, more comfortable around her

father rather than her mother. Louise went out of her way to make Tamika feel like an outcast.”

Alex shook her head. “How can a mother get so warped as to try and hurt her child rather than love her. I’ll never understand.”

“Neither will I.”

Alex looked down at the picture again. Gwen and Matthew looked so happy.

Sighing, she asked, “So, what happened?”

“Three months into the separation, Matthew said he had filed for divorce, but Louise was making it very difficult. He had made all these plans, he told me. They were going to get divorced; he would gain custody of Tamika and the three of us would be a new family. He even asked me to marry him,” Gwen told her.

Alex heard the anguished tremor in her friend’s voice.

“But Louise put a sword through any plans Matt had made. She might as well have put the sword through his heart.”

Shaking her head, Gwen felt the emotions as if it just happened, not five years ago.

Whimpering, Teddy stood up and began nudging Gwen's arm.

Alarmed, Gwen asked Alex, "What's wrong with him? Is he okay?"

Alex smiled. "He's fine, hon. But he's worried about you."

"Really?"

Alex nodded. "Just pat his head and tell him you're all right."

As Gwen did that, her body relaxed. Alex could see her shoulders drop down, her breaths slow down, and her face lose the pinched anxiety that had masked her normally happy countenance.

As the two of them bonded, Alex thought to herself, God does indeed work in mysterious ways. Gwen rescued Teddy and now he's rescuing her.

"How come you didn't tell me any of this at the time you were seeing Matthew? I didn't even know you were seeing someone."

"You were living in Boston and working for Pinkerton's. Your work took you all over the state. You rarely got to come home for a visit,



and when you did you spent it mostly with your folks.”

“Yes, but you and I talked on the phone every week.”

“I know. While Matt and I were seeing each other, I was afraid something might happen, so I didn’t want to share it until I knew we were in it for the long haul. Then, when he left for Florida, I just couldn’t talk about it at all.”

Alex, reaching over, put her hand over her friend’s. They clasped hands. Alex was very glad to be here now for Gwen.

Over the next fifteen minutes Gwen shared with Alex the course of her courtship with Matthew – pictures and letters painted a vivid picture of two people deeply in love.

“You still haven’t told me what happened.”

“The only way Louise would grant him a divorce is if he agreed to move to another state and never have communication with either one of his kids again.”

“Naturally he wouldn’t agree to that!” Alex guessed.

Letting out a huge sigh, Gwen finally continued. “Louise said if he didn’t agree to her terms, she

was going to tell the judge that he molested their daughter.”

“WHAT? That’s the most outrageous thing I’ve heard. After looking at these pictures and reading his own words, this is not a man who would do any such thing.”

“I know. You know how artistic and talented Tamika is, right?”

“Yes. Very. She draws and paints beautifully.”

“Well, so does Matt, her father. See that picture on the wall?” Gwen said, pointing to a framed watercolor over her desk.

“That’s you sitting on a sea wall. It’s incredible.”

“Matt painted that. Father and daughter share many traits and talents. He used to take her to art galleries and museums, and he taught her how to paint. They did spend a great deal of time together. Louise told him she would drag his name through the mud, taking Tamika right along in it unless he signed the divorce and moved away, preferably to Florida, she said.”

“That woman is pure evil,” Alex said.

“You don’t know the half of it. After the divorce and he had left, Louise made Tam’s life a living hell for five years. And just for fun she made up

lies about Matt and told them to Tam – terrible things that made him out to be a monster. Tam did wonder why he never got in touch with her, but she never believed the lies or lost faith in her Dad. But that’s not the end of it.”

“You’re kidding. There’s more?”

“Two years ago, Louise told her kids that Matt was dead. That he drank himself to death.”

“Well – is it true? Not that he was a drunk, but is Matt dead?”

“I don’t know. My lawyer has been looking into it. In order for me to adopt Tamika, both birth parents need to give up their rights, or just one of them if the other is deceased. Louise presented the court with a death certificate for Matt, but my lawyer thinks it’s a fake. She’s been looking into it.”

Alex sat back in her chair. “Wow. That’s about all I can say. This is unbelievable.”

“Alex, I never told Tam that her father and I had been seeing each other. In fact, he proposed to me before he learned all this stuff Louise put in motion. Then – poof – any chance we had went up in smoke.”

Just then a knock came at the bedroom door.

“Come in?” Gwen said.

“Hi dear. Sorry to interrupt you girls.” As Eugenie caught sight of Teddy, she amended, “and boy. We come bringing coffee and cookies. You both looked like you could use a pick-me-up on this wintry day.”

Both girls stood and helped the women put the food and drink on the table. They had even brought a bowl for Teddy. Gwen took it into the bathroom and filled it with cold tap water.

Gwen looked at the tray and laughed. Bea and Eugenie had included a doggie biscuit for Teddy.

“Something tells me this dog is going to be spoiled in no time.”

“You’re talking about my four-legged grand-doggie. It’s my duty to spoil him,” Eugenie announced.

“Thank you so much Eugenie and Bea,” Alex said. “I have been yearning for a hot cup of coffee all afternoon. You are angels. And these look like home-made chocolate chip cookies, my absolute favorite,” Alex gushed.

Bea spoke up. “We made extra ones. We’ll probably be eating chocolate chip cookies for months.”

“Sounds perfect to me, Bea,” Gwen said. “Thanks everybody.”

“We’ve decided to take a break now, too, dear. Then we just have to put the lasagna in to bake. We’re making two. One for dinner and one for tomorrow.”

“Mom, Bea, you both are the best. Without you two there would be no party tomorrow, no food, no nothing.” Getting up, Gwen went over, engulfing the two women in a great big hug.

“Oh hush, now. You three enjoy and we’ll see you later.”

After they left, the girls remained quiet for a few minutes while enjoying their luscious cookies and extremely good coffee.

Finally, though, Alex spoke up. “Gwen you have to tell Tamika. All of it.”

Gwen looked at her, shaking her head.

“Yes. All of it. You want to be her mother. That’s a sacred relationship and responsibility. You do not want to start off with something this big, a

festering secret growing ever bigger between you.”

Moving a bit in her chair, Gwen said, “I thought I’d wait and find out about Matt first.”

“No. I understand. But you must tell her tonight. Tomorrow, once the adoption goes through, it’s too late.”

“Court might be cancelled. You’ve seen the weather out.”

“Tonight, hon. Tonight.”

Letting her head hang down, Gwen slowly nodded. She felt like she barely had the energy to do even that.

After a few minutes of silence, Alex changed the subject. “Gwen, you never told me why you and Ronnie broke up. You had been together since last summer. Did something go wrong?”

“You could say it was a lot of things. First, I eventually realized that our relationship was going nowhere. He was content, I was not. I had also begun to understand that I wasn’t in love with Ronnie – just the idea of him. I was in love with the idea of being in love. I wanted what I had with Matthew and that was never going to happen, not with Ronnie. I want

someone to spend the rest of my life with, someone special. When I realized it wasn't going to be him, I broke up with him, that was three weeks' ago. He's having a hard time accepting it."

As if on cue, the doorbell rang. Teddy, sitting up, cocked his head to the side, while looking at Gwen. She explained about doorbells.

"Does Tam ring the bell when she comes home?"

"No, she has her own key."

They listened but couldn't hear anything.

Downstairs, Eugenie opened the front door and immediately wished she hadn't.

"What is it Ronald?"

"I want to see Gwen," came his reply.

"She has a friend over and she's busy."

"I don't care. I left some things here and I want to pick them up now."

In the kitchen Bea, hearing his voice, knew it could mean trouble. She ran to the intercom on the wall, turning it on, hoping his voice was loud enough to transmit upstairs to Gwen's room.

The girls did, indeed, hear Ronald's voice, not necessarily all the words but they caught the anger punctuating his speech.

Together they got up and told Teddy to stay put. Walking out to the hallway, they closed the door behind them.

Ronald gave Eugenie a slight shove. "Out of my way, old lady, I'm getting my stuff." He made it up the stairs where he found Gwen and Alex waiting for him in the hall.

"Look, I'm just going in there and getting my stuff."

"No, you're not," Gwen answered.

But Ronnie swiftly pushed Gwen aside and got the door open.

"What the hell?" he screamed as he pulled the door shut quickly.

"What is that?" he demanded. "It showed me its fangs and growled. He could have eaten me!"

Alex and Gwen laughed.

"No, he wouldn't have, not unless I told him to," Gwen answered calmly.

Standing there, Ronald crossed his arms, angrily waiting for an explanation.



“Listen, Ronnie, yesterday, Monday, I boxed up all the rest of your belongings and sent them to your house. They are probably waiting there today for you when you get home.”

“You sure you got everything?”

“Positive. After you get it if you think of something that might be missing, give me a call.”

“Right. You don’t take my calls.”

“I promise I will.”

Begrudgingly, he agreed.

“Did you ever get in touch with Vince?” she asked.

“What did you say?” The alarm in his voice jumped out.

“One day a guy named Vince called here looking for you. He said he was your partner and that you better give him a call pronto if you knew what was good for you. I thought you didn’t have a partner in your accounting practice.”

“I don’t. I swear. Vince is a client. He thinks that makes us partners or something.”

“Really? How dumb do you think I am, Ronald? This wasn’t about accounting. No one gets that deeply disturbed and upset over ledgers.”

“Gwen, trust me when I say this. Forget about that phone call. And especially forget you ever heard the name Vince. Okay? For your own safety, please.” Ronnie seemed to really mean it and that turned Alex’s radar to a whole new level.

“Ron, is Gwen in any danger?”

“What? No, of course not. And to stay that way, just forget it all. Okay? Look I got to run. If he should call again, please get in touch with me. All right?”

“Sure. Whatever you’re mixed up in, you better get yourself out of it, Ronnie.”

“Yeah, I’m beginning to think the same thing. See ya, doll.”

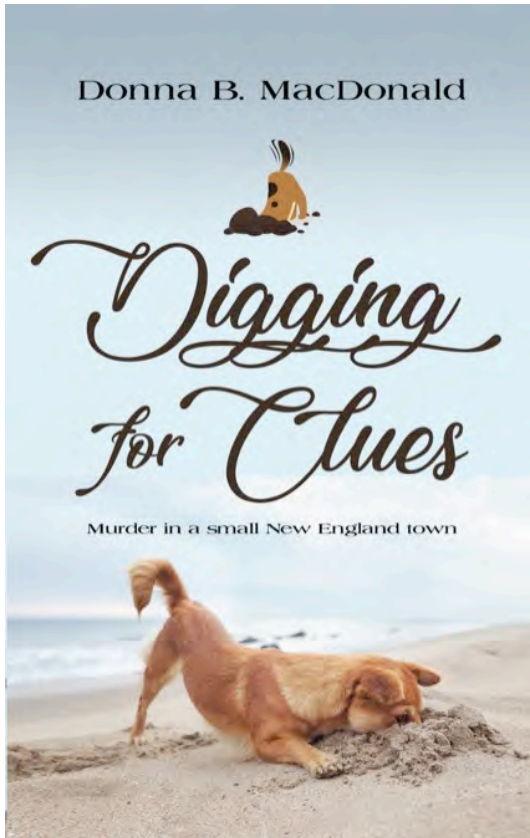
With that he clomped down the stairs in his winter boots and strode quickly to the front door, letting himself out.

“Wow, that was odd,” Gwen exclaimed.

“Yes, and we might not have heard the last of this Vince, and certainly Ronald will be around

again. As Watson would say to Sherlock, the game is afoot.”

“I don’t think I’m going to like this game, Alex.”



*Alexandra Mackenzie and her new husband, Chief of Police, Andrew Marlow, attempt to solve several mysteries in their town and their two dogs and two cats jump into the fray to help.*

## **DIGGING FOR CLUES**

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