



Mae pointed to the schedule. “Some people seem to be in dire straits.”

With her hands on her hips, Dorey asked, “What does that mean?”

She pursed her red lipstick-covered lips and looked over her reading glasses at Dorey, looking every bit the disappointed teacher when a student answers incorrectly. “Dire straits is defined as—”

“No, I know the definition. I mean, why do you say that? Is there some strain of flu going around?” Why did Mae always treat Dorey like an underachieving wayward granddaughter?

“Nothing as mundane as flu.”

“What, then?” Dorey almost wished she could take the words back, not wanting Mae to delve into the definition of flu.

“Well, like I said, a few gave the excuse of not wanting to see a hygienist because of what Dr. Connors said. But a couple of them ...”

Dorey lowered her eyebrows.

“It seems” —Mae gave a quick shake of her head— “There’s some rogue person going around wearing masks.”

“Like Halloween?”

“I guess.”

“What kind of masks?”

“Someone wearing a hideous clown mask peeked in a patient’s living room window and scared her so bad she didn’t want to leave her house.”

“I do understand the whole aversion to clowns thing. But I wish the patient would have come in anyway. Are there more patients like that?”

“There’s another one who said a person in a mask knocked on her door, and when she answered, he ran away.”

“I take it this mask was scary too?”

“A zombie.”

“Ugh.”

“Precisely. I don’t know what the world is coming to, but I’m not sure I like where it’s headed. I feel like I should be wearing garlic around my neck to ward off the curse.” Mae tapped her throat twice.

Not cursed, at least Dorey didn’t think so. But something was going on. How bizarre that a couple of their patients saw a person in a scary mask on the same day? Did things like that happen during a full moon?

Halfway down the hall to her room, Mae hollered her name, and Dorey hurried back to the front desk.

Mae held out her phone. “Guy on the phone says he needs to talk to you.”

“Who is it?”

“Wouldn’t say. Just that it’s important.”

Dorey shrugged and took the phone. “Hello? This is Dorey. How can I help y—”

The phone clicked. Then, a dial tone. Dorey frowned and gave the phone back. “Weird. Nobody there.”

Mae shrugged. “Maybe a wrong number.”

Dorey nodded and turned. Wait. How could it be a wrong

number if they'd asked for her specifically? She shook her head and ambled back down the hall. Whatever. Some weirdo just wanting to cause trouble. Who knew?

There had to be someone she could get to come in. She turned the corner toward her room. Half her day was shot. Harry wouldn't blame Dorey for the cancellations, but he wouldn't be amused either. She wanted to help his practice, but so far, the hygiene schedule wasn't cooperating.

Hurrying past his operatory doorway, she hoped he wouldn't see her. What would she tell him when he found out about the world's fastest crumbling dental schedule? Try to make light of it? Say something funny to make him laugh? After his dealings with Mrs. Harkins, he might not be in the best mood when it came to uncooperative patients. Maybe she could get some others to fill in the gaps before he found out.

The middle drawer of her right-side cabinet held her printed schedules for the next few weeks. Although, they'd need to be reprinted before the scheduled days. There would be too many changes to simply use a pen and do the occasional cross-out and write in.

Dorey opened the drawer and peered inside. Where was it? She always kept it there for when she had to try to call someone in. She rifled through the pamphlets on tooth brushing and flossing where her list usually was, then frowned. No one would have taken it. Harry, Luanne, and Mae wouldn't have a use for her list. Nobody else knew she kept it there. Weird.

Luckily, she remembered some of the names, so she recreated the list as best she could. Maybe someone would be able to come in. Someone ... anyone ...

After updating that day's lineup with who hadn't shown up, she laid her new list of potential people next to it on the counter. With any luck, she'd get several to commit, and Mae could print out the updated schedule for her. Then Harry wouldn't even have to know how bad it had been. He'd never been in the habit

of checking her schedule, only his, trusting her to take care of it. By all appearances, she wasn't doing a bang-up job.

Dorey tapped in the phone number of the first name on her list.

"Mrs. Campbell? Hello, this is Dorey, the hygienist for Dr. MacKinley. We have some openings today, and I'm checking to see—"

"I'm sorry, Dorey. We're in a bit of a snag right now. Angelique ran away."

"Ran away?" She frowned, trying to remember if they had a daughter with that name. It didn't sound familiar. "Angelique ..."

"Our pedigreed poodle."

"Oh, my goodness, well, I hope you find her."

"Him. Angelique is a boy." Indignation flowed down the phone line.

Okay ... Maybe the dog ran away to escape his embarrassing girly name. Poor mutt.

"He was out in the yard and got scared off by a man wearing some hideous mask."

Mask?

"Until I find Angelique, I won't be able to concentrate on anything else."

The phone clicked in Dorey's ear. She was almost afraid to call someone else.

Don't be silly. These are flukes. What were the chances that other people would have something similar? She hadn't heard any news stories about crazy people in costumes, but then she did tend to retreat into her own little world with her cat once she left work for the day. Sometimes he got a little possessive with her time and grumbled if he didn't receive her undivided attention.

Harry's deep voice floated in from down the short hallway,

laughing at something Luanne said. Very soon, sooner than Dorey would like, he'd finish his patient and come talk to her. Then, she'd have to tell him about the schedule.

Unless he already knew.

No. If he knew, he might have said something.

Dorey grabbed the phone again. I have to find someone to come in.

Footsteps came from the hallway. Harry walked in, his eyes taking in the empty patient chair. "What's up? Somebody not show?"

"Make that nobody." She set down the phone.

He tilted his head. "How's that?"

Dorey fidgeted with the pen in her left hand. "You may as well know..."

"What?" He took a step closer, concern etched on his face.

"We're having lots of trouble getting patients in. I hate that. I feel so bad that no money is coming in when you have tons of bills to pay. I even noticed one from the upholsterer on Mae's desk earlier today."

"Don't worry about it."

"The schedule fell apart. Disintegrated." She touched the arm of the chair, feeling terrible that he'd spent so much money on upgrading it, yet no patient sat there.

He waved his hand. "It happens."

"Yeah, if there's a flu epidemic or six feet of snow. Neither of which is happening right now."

He shrugged. "I guess it's to be expected when word got out what I said to Mrs. Harkins."

"That's not all of it."

"How can you be sure? That is one rude woman. And after all, I did tell her to spread the word, hoping to keep out the fellow evil-doers."

"Because I doubt even evil Mrs. Harkins is running around

town in masks scaring people enough that they are afraid to leave home.” She crossed her arms.

His eyes widened. “What?”

“I know. Strange, huh? That happened to some of our patients, but only to ones on my schedule.”

“Only on yours?” He narrowed his eyes. “Hmm. I knew you were trouble the first time I met you.”

“Um ... what?”

“Ever since you were little, problems seemed to follow you.”

Her mouth dropped open. “That’s not true.”

Harry stared at her for a second then sputtered out a laugh. “Joking.”

Sometimes the guy’s timing for humor wasn’t the best. She huffed out a breath. “Let’s hope it’s not true. I can’t believe all the hygiene patients who aren’t showing. It’s unreal. They’re dropping like swatted gnats.”

“So ...” He leaned closer and gave a loud sniff, sounding like a bloodhound on the hunt.

She backed away, her butt slamming into the counter behind her. “What’re you doing?”

“You take a shower today? Maybe, you know, word got around that you ...”

“You are such a guy.” She smacked his shoulder.

He grinned.

“Yes, I took a shower, so I don’t stink. And no, I’m not wearing patient repellent.”

He cuffed her on the side of the head, lightly. Just like he did when they were kids. She hated that.

Pushing his hand away, she frowned. “Seriously, Harry, what are we gonna do?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“It’s your name.”

“Not—” He glanced out into the empty hallway. “—at work.”

“Why not?”

“After the Mrs. Harkins debacle,” he pointed toward Dorey’s patient chair with his thumb, “I need all the credibility I can get. Harrison sounds more respectable than Harry. Maybe it would make a difference to a patient still not sure about me.”

“Whatever. I am not going to call you Harrison. I’ve never called you that. Neither did anyone else except your mother. And that’s only when you’d done something extraordinarily bad.”

He dropped his mouth open in mock surprise. “Insubordination? From my own employee?”

“Sometimes they refuse to grow up.” She shook her head and walked toward the door.