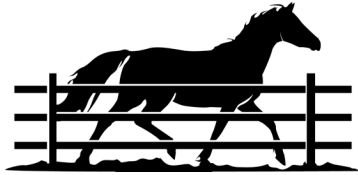


Chapter Two



Liesl

Liesl Schrader smiled as she pushed through the revolving doors of Community One Bank's downtown branch. This morning's mission would be a delightful surprise to share with Mr. Barnaby, the bank's president.

Sparks of excitement surged through her. Today, she'd set into motion this phase of her plan for a Community Center. She and Mr. Barnaby, one of her favorite people, would start a special project for the citizens of Mexico, Missouri.

Liesl waved to a teller, who smiled as she made her way to the teller line. Mr. Barnaby's office sat behind their counter.

Several people were queued up for service in the teller line. Liesl stood on tiptoes to see if Mr. Barnaby was free. She glanced at her watch. Still a few minutes until their nine o'clock meeting. It wouldn't do for her to barge into his office if he was busy.

Barnaby's office was a glass-sided cubicle. Liesl recognized

the person sitting across the desk from Mr. Barnaby. Katherine Mull. This recognition wiped the smile from Liesl's face and drew sympathy for the sweet banker. Everyone pitied those forced to deal with Katherine.

Katherine was a tall, birdlike woman with chemically induced blonde hair, enhanced monthly by her stylist, and a nose too big for her face. A nose that peered down at other people.

Liesl turned left and walked toward the loan officer's desk. Miranda Marquette glanced up. A grin replaced her former business-like concentration. They'd been friends since grade school.

"Hey there, Liesl. How're you doing this morning?"

"Great, until I saw Katherine with Mr. Barnaby." Liesl shook her head. "Poor man."

Miranda was always chipper. Yet even her smile faded when Liesl mentioned Katherine. "I know. Sad, isn't it?" Miranda gestured toward the chairs at the front of her desk. "Please have a seat."

"Thank you." Liesl sat and placed her purse and leather briefcase on the chair beside her.

"Katherine didn't have an appointment. She just stalked in and made a tremendous fuss. Mr. Barnaby ran out to help her, and then she shouted at him, right here in the lobby."

"Shouted at Mr. Barnaby?"

"Sure did. Luckily, he herded her into his office before she made too big of a fuss. We don't need such things happening in front of our other customers."

"Katherine is certainly mean, but I didn't figure she was malicious enough to yell at such a nice man. Why would she do that?"

Miranda shrugged. "Apparently Katherine has a reason." She rolled her brown eyes behind her cute glasses.

Liesl gripped the arms of her chair. “That makes me furious. She should relate with people the way God intended us to act. Everyone in her path gets hurt.”

“I know.” Miranda bent toward Liesl and whispered, “No one ever wants to assist her. She’s always so crabby and threatens to report us for poor service, no matter how hard we try to please her.” Then, in her normal speaking voice, added, “Aren’t you scheduled for an appointment with Mr. Barnaby now?”

“Yes, but I’m considering rescheduling. I don’t want to apply any additional pressure on him. His posture and face telegraphed his misery.”

“I’m sure he’s uncomfortable.”

They both glanced toward Mr. Barnaby’s office, which was visible from their side of the lobby. Although the conversation behind the glass was inaudible, Katherine’s angry countenance and flailing gestures told an obvious story.

Miranda turned back toward Liesl. “It appears his hands are full right now. Could I help you with something?”

“I wanted to talk to him about an extensive project. My plan was to run it by Mr. Barnaby first.” Liesl turned to gather her purse and briefcase. “I might as well wait. I want the project to start with him, but I’m sure we’ll get you involved eventually.”

“I look forward to working with you on it,” Miranda said. “In the meantime, I’ll take your appointment off his schedule.” She turned to her monitor and taped on a few keys. “Would you like an appointment this afternoon?”

“No, I have to set up for that fundraiser tonight at Simmons Stables. Could I reschedule for Tuesday morning?”

“Nine o’clock?”

“Perfect. I have things I need to do before the fundraiser

today, anyway. Putting off our appointment will benefit me in the long run.”

Liesl pulled out her phone and added the rescheduled appointment to her calendar. “Please give my apologies to Mr. Barnaby. Tell him I look forward to talking with him on Tuesday.”

“Thank you for understanding, Liesl. Katherine’s a handful.” Miranda’s sunny smile was back. “We look forward to seeing you again under better circumstances.”

When Liesl turned toward the exit, she spotted one of her former Sunday School instructors in the teller line. She said hello to Mr. Mansfield. Before she left, she’d spoken to several other acquaintances in the lobby. A benefit of small-town life, friends could be almost anywhere, anytime.

When Liesl stepped onto the sidewalk, she transferred her briefcase to her left hand. With her free hand, she groped in her purse for sunglasses. Either the sun was always beating down in June in Missouri, or rain poured on its citizens. She preferred sunshine any day. The local farmers might choose the precipitation.

A black police sedan pulled to the curb. Detectives Kurt Hunter and his partner, Hector Vega, emerged from the car. Kurt was tall, with an athletic build. Hector, several inches taller than Kurt, had bushy black hair that added even more height to his appearance.

Kurt grinned at her, causing her stomach to do a quick flip.

This was the first time she’d seen him back on regular duty. He’d completed restricted duty following a recent knife wound to his shoulder, and the happiness shining on his face displayed his pleasure to be back at work.

Kurt strode toward her. “Doing a little banking this morning?”

She gave him a lazy smile. It was hard to resist the urge to

toss her briefcase and hug him in the middle of downtown Mexico. “I was supposed to meet with Mr. Barnaby today, but Katherine Mull changed my plans.”

Kurt’s eyebrows raised. “What happened?”

Liesl shrugged. “I don’t know the details. Apparently, she waltzed in and yelled at Mr. Barnaby until he whisked her into his office. From the little I could see through his glass walls, she’s still in there ranting.”

Kurt and Hector frowned.

“Interesting,” Kurt said. “We’re to report on an incident here.”

“The bank reported her behavior? As threatening or something?”

Hector shook his head. “No. We’ve been told there might be an issue of fraud. What exactly did you see in there?”

“From the lobby, Katherine’s face was flushed, and I saw her gesturing angrily at Mr. Barnaby. I couldn’t hear their conversation, but I witnessed him taking a beating with her words. He seemed crushed.”

Hector and Kurt exchanged a look of dread.

If they were heading off to deal with a furious Katherine, she felt sorry for them. The girl was a monster.

Liesl said, “I wish I could tell you more.” After a pause, she added, “I don’t understand why you’ve been called in. Isn’t bank fraud a federal matter?”

“It depends whether the bank is a state charter or a federal charter,” Hector said. “Community One Bank is a state charter.” He turned to Kurt. “We gotta go.”

Kurt winked at her. “I’ll see you at the fundraiser.”

She nodded. “I’m heading there now. It’s going to be a long day. And a long evening. Are you bringing Ross?”

“No. My parents took him to the Lake of the Ozarks for a couple of weeks.

“I’ll bet he was thrilled.” She was fond of his son, who was nearly eight years old. Kurt had been a single parent since Ross was born.

Hector patted her on the shoulder. “Hey, I know you’ll miss Ross, but I’ll be there too. See you tonight.”

She watched Hector and Kurt push into the bank.

Possible fraud? What could have happened to Katherine that might have been fraudulent?

Kurt took his police duties seriously, so he wouldn’t provide her the answers. But she and Nicole could conjecture all about it. She and her best friend would be spending the afternoon setting up the fundraiser. Plenty of time for speculation about why Katherine jumped onto the anger bus. Liesl resented the woman trying to crush Mr. Barnaby beneath its wheels.

She prayed that Mr. Barnaby wouldn’t suffer any negative consequences. Poor man.

And poor Hector and Kurt.

She pitied *anyone* who crossed paths with Katherine Mull. Including herself.