

Unwanted Agenda

By Sandra Denbo and Tamarine Vilar

Chapter 1

Outside the steamy windows, rivulets of rain shivered from the gusts of howling December wind. It was well after breakfast time, but the cozy diner was still busy. The aroma of bacon, hot maple syrup, and fresh coffee filled the air. Just outside of Portland, Oregon, this was Sharon Cooper's favorite place to meet, and it was convenient for the whole family.

Although she was nearing fifty, Sharon looked much younger. Those genes came from her mother, Alice, who died last year. Thankfully, that was the only trait she got from her — in character, there was no resemblance. Sharon's kind, hazel eyes and proper sense of right and wrong came from her father. Although he had died almost twenty years ago, she still treasured his life lessons. She always looked for the good in people and situations. Most of all, she cherished her family — her devoted husband, Jack, her son, Mark, who was away at college, and daughter, Callie, who was two years younger than Mark.

Yet here in front of her were family members she was just getting to know. Sharon unconsciously twisted her strawberry-blonde hair as her mind wandered back to just over a year ago, when she first met these women sitting with her in the big corner booth. After living most of her life as an only child, she was still in a bit of shock at how much her life had changed since she found out about her father's previous life and that she had three half-sisters. Stranger still, she was surprised at herself that she had started to like the idea of getting to know them.

Arlene Rand was the oldest, sitting across from her along the left side of the table with her back to the wall. Arlene had recently started to get her hair done regularly with highlights, which was a definite improvement over the mousy brown her hair had been when they first met. If she wore makeup, she would definitely look better, almost pretty — if it weren't for the constant sneer on her thin lips. Her blue eyes seemed devoid of emotion except for disdain. That and her bifocals gave her the look of the proverbial spinster librarian. Arlene had already let Sharon know that as far as she was concerned, Sharon was the outsider. Sharon hoped that as time passed, Arlene would eventually accept her — or at least tolerate her.

Bonnie Parker was the middle sister and sat to Arlene's left. Sitting between her taller sisters, Bonnie's petite frame made her look even shorter, as if she were a child between them. Unlike Arlene, Bonnie was always cheerful and upbeat. Sharon watched as Bonnie pulled out her compact. When Sharon had first seen it, she had thought that Bonnie must've bought it at some high-fashion boutique. The crystals, beads, and stones were arranged in a delicate paisley pattern. She smiled as she recalled Bonnie telling her that she had created the design. It was then

that Sharon realized that, aside from Bonnie's somewhat clueless demeanor, she had an extraordinarily creative imagination. Sharon watched as Bonnie opened the compact to primp her short, wavy, dark brown hair. Sharon always enjoyed being around Bonnie — she made her laugh, even if it was sometimes unintentionally.

Visibly annoyed by Bonnie's jingling charm bracelet, Arlene sighed loudly and gave her younger sister a contemptuous look. Sharon groaned inside, thinking that Arlene would probably never appreciate Bonnie's abilities, and she twisted her hair again.

She turned to look at Charlotte Knapp, who sat to her right at the end of the table. Although Charlotte was the youngest, she was the tallest of the three. She had slouched down, with her long, blonde hair draped on either side of her face. Charlotte looked at her hands folded in her lap. She glanced up occasionally with those long-lashed, blue eyes. Even though Sharon and Charlotte were the same age, Sharon thought that if she wore makeup and dressed a little more carefully, she could pass for a model. Still slouching, Charlotte shifted her weight and crossed her long, slim legs. Sharon wished Charlotte had a little more self-confidence. Sharon looked at her watch and leaned forward anxiously. "Nobody spilled the beans, right?"

Arlene raised one eyebrow above her bifocals. "You worry too much. She thinks this meeting is about Callie's wedding plans. Remember? It was your idea."

Since Sharon's back was to the lobby, she realized that Karen Frainey had arrived only when Bonnie waved to her mother. Karen was tall, gentle, and beautiful with or without makeup. Charlotte looked the most like her. Unlike Charlotte, Karen carried herself with confidence. Her hair was pulled back in a soft bun except for short curls that framed her face. The relentless gray had been winning the battle over the once-blonde mane she had so proudly displayed in her younger days. Just last year, she had given up the battle and stopped dyeing her hair — much to the objections of her daughters. She told them she didn't want to bother with the effort and expense anymore.

Karen closed her umbrella and shook off most of the raindrops. When she saw her girls and Sharon, she smiled, crinkling the corners of her bright, green eyes. She sat down at the left end of the booth and glanced at the coffee awaiting her at her spot. "Sorry I'm late. I got a phone call just as I was leaving the house. Thanks for ordering coffee for me." Looking at Sharon, she smiled politely. "I'm so glad Callie's going to marry Roy. He's such a nice boy."

"So am I," Sharon said. She smiled and looked at everyone else around the table.

Bonnie bounced in her seat, her green eyes wide with anticipation. "I can't stand it anymore; we lied to you. We all wanted to be together when we told you."

Arlene rolled her eyes. "You just can't keep a secret, can you?"

Bonnie tilted her head. "What?! We're all here now. Why not tell her?"

"Tell me what?" Karen squinted at her. "What are you all up to?"

Bonnie giggled. "We have something for you."

Sharon leaned forward with a twinkle in her eyes. "Remember how it took so long to inventory Alice's — well actually, Dad's — estate?"

Karen nodded.

“Well, as soon as it was settled and we all got our shares, we started talking.”

“Yeah, and we all agreed,” Bonnie jumped in. “We each want to give you a fifth of what we inherited. That way we’ll each have four-fifths.” She leaned over and whispered to Arlene, “Four-fifths is right, isn’t it?”

Arlene slowly turned to look at Bonnie. “Oh, Honey, you’re so lucky you’re pretty.”

Proud of herself, Bonnie smiled as she straightened up. “Thanks!”

Ignoring that, Karen looked around at the girls with shock. “Oh, girls, you don’t have to do that.”

Charlotte blushed. “We know that. We want to.” She leaned forward and begged, “Please Mom? We really want to.”

Bonnie giggled. “And that’s what makes it so fun.”

“I can’t believe this. And you, Sharon — you hardly know me.” Karen’s voice was soft and low.

Sharon became aware that Arlene was staring at her ambiguously. Uncomfortable, she looked away and shrugged. “We all agreed it was the right thing to do.”

“So the wedding was never going to be the topic?”

“Well, I do have a couple things I wanted to discuss, but, no, it wasn’t why we got you here.”

“I never would’ve guessed.” As Karen removed her coat, the rest of the women reached into their pockets and purses and pulled out envelopes, each containing a check. “I feel guilty taking this from all of you. Shouldn’t you be taking care of your families?”

Bonnie looked puzzled. “Mom, I think that’s what we’re doing. Aren’t we?”

“You know what I mean. Your kids.”

“They’re fine. Don’t you worry about it.”

“But, Charlotte, your boys are still in school. And I know for a fact how expensive college is.”

Charlotte smiled shyly. “We have enough left over and then some. Go ahead, look.”

When Karen opened the first envelope, she gasped. “Oh! You can’t be serious! You each got five times this?”

Sharon smiled. “Well, you saw The Mansion. Alice had a lot of antiques, fine art, and collectibles. And then The Mansion sold for almost two million.”

Bonnie giggled. “You wouldn’t believe the dance John and I did when we got the check. His special-order Corvette Stingray is being shipped in next week.” Then she rolled her eyes and sighed. “You know what he said? He said that even with giving you a fifth, we’ll still have too much for me to spend it all on clothes. Can you imagine?”

Charlotte grinned.

Karen wiped a tear. “I’m astonished. To say thank you isn’t nearly enough. What can I do to repay you?”

“Oh, good grief, Mom. We don’t expect anything in return. It’s a gift. That’s the point — you aren’t obligated. Okay?” Arlene said.

Karen’s lip quivered and she looked at each one. “Thank you. All of you,” she whispered.

Arlene took a sip of her coffee. “So, Sharon, didn’t you just say you wanted to talk about the wedding after all?”

“Oh, yes. Callie wanted to know if any of you would like to be involved in the wedding planning.”

Karen took her hand. “I’d be delighted to. Just tell me what you’d like me to do.”

“Thanks, Karen. I’ll ask Callie what she’d like. Since she hasn’t decided on anything yet, it’s pretty wide open.” Sharon saw Charlotte shrink back and bite her lip, so she asked her, “Charlotte, what do you think?”

“Well, I’ve never had a wedding. I eloped the first time, and then with Hal, we went to the Justice of the Peace to get married. I wouldn’t know how to plan a wedding.” She paused for a moment. “Well, Arlene and Bonnie had big weddings, of course — but I really didn’t do any of the planning. I was just a teen-ager.”

Arlene scowled at Charlotte. “Why’d you marry Kurt anyway? You knew we didn’t approve of that jerk. You couldn’t even sneeze without his permission. And heaven forbid you have an opinion. Did he pick out your clothes for you, too?” She huffed. “I’m so glad Josh ran away so you could get out of there.”

Charlotte blanched and fingered her locket.

Karen frowned at Arlene. “Don’t talk to your sister like that. Yes, she made a mistake, but it’s in the past now. It doesn’t do any good to make her feel worse about it.”

Feeling bad for Charlotte, Sharon leaned over to her. “Charlotte, I have a confession. Callie said I was supposed to do anything to get your help — even if it meant bribing you.”

With her head down, Charlotte glanced at her sisters and her mother, and then she fidgeted. “I guess. But I don’t know how much help I could be.”

Bonnie leaned forward. “I’d love to help pick out the dresses! Callie’s so lucky — she won’t need a booster like I did.”

“A booster?” Sharon squinted at her.

“Yeah, you know, one of those things that sucks in your waist and makes you look skinnier and pops your boobs up to your chin?”

Arlene rubbed her temples. “Bonnie, that’s a bustier.”

“Yeah, that!”

Sharon giggled. “I think she’d like that, Bonnie, I’ll have her call you.”

“One of my co-workers makes cakes as a hobby. Well, she’s actually trying to get a business started. She even has a portfolio. I can give you her number,” Arlene said.

“That would be great.”

They talked for another half an hour about the wedding plans and how they might spend their inheritance money. Then they made arrangements for another meeting. They headed for the door and paused in the entryway to put on their coats.

Without looking at Sharon, Arlene said, "I'll get that phone number, you know, for the cake."

"Thanks." Sharon turned to Charlotte. "I'll have Callie give you a call, too."

Charlotte nodded.

"Sharon, what are you doing on Sunday?" Karen asked.

"Well, I help Jack get snacks ready for the game on TV, but then I usually read a book or go shopping."

"Oh, good! It isn't just me and the girls. What do you say we arrange for the men to gather at one of our homes, and we can meet at another for cheese and wine? How big is your TV? They'll want the one with the biggest screen."

Bonnie raised her hand. "John just bought one that takes up, like, the whole wall in the living room. It's totally ridiculous. I had to move all the pictures and stuff to make room for it. I feel like I live in a theater now."

"Do you think he'd mind having all the guys over for the game every week?"

"As long as he doesn't have to get up to get his beer. Which isn't a problem now since he put a mini-fridge next to the couch."

Arlene frowned. "I don't know why you put up with that. A fridge in the living room? Now that's downright lazy — and tacky."

Bonnie shrugged and then smiled. "It's okay. He's happy, and I don't have to go fetch for him."

Arlene frowned and shook her head. "He's got you wrapped around his little finger."

Bonnie's eyebrows knitted for a moment. "I don't think that's possible," she said slowly.

Arlene rolled her eyes.

"I'm sure the guys would love it. We'll just make sure they have their snacks before we take off for girl time." Karen said.

Sharon grinned. "I'd love to have all of you over to my house. I can put together a cheese plate as long as you each bring a bottle of wine."

"That sounds perfect. With the giant TV, I don't think they'll miss us. Let's all leave for your place right after the men leave for Bonnie's."

"Okay. It's a date."

The rain had turned to a downpour, so Charlotte, Bonnie, and Karen ran to their cars.

Sharon walked up behind Arlene as she buttoned up her coat to leave. "Arlene, could we talk for a moment?"

Arlene sighed and her shoulders slumped. "I suppose." She turned around. "What do you want?"

“I wanted to thank you for coming.”

“Well, I’d do anything for Mom.” As Arlene stared at her, she seemed a little less tense. “By the way, that was big of you, sharing your part of the inheritance with our mom. You didn’t have to do it, you know. So thank you. She really needed it.”

“Well, after everything that happened, I just felt it was the right thing to do.” Then Sharon frowned. “That stuff you said about Charlotte and her ex — just how bad was it back then?”

“Well, if you have to know, she was damaged — still is. Kurt was a real control freak. He didn’t beat her, but he might as well have. We were all glad to see her get away from him.”

“How’d she manage that?”

“Well you know she had the two boys with him. Josh, being the oldest, was a pretty headstrong kid. But it turned out to be a good thing. When he was nine, he assumed he was the reason Kurt was mean, and he ran away. He did it to save his mom — he thought that if he wasn’t there, then Kurt would be nice to her and Cal.

“Well, when that happened, the police and Child Protective Services got involved. Then the boys started to tell everything that Kurt did to them, but mostly Josh. The authorities said that she had to leave Kurt or she’d lose the boys. The only way he could see the boys was under supervision, but he never even did that. It just proved what kind of jerk he was!” Arlene clenched her jaw, shook her head, and took a deep breath. “I don’t think she would’ve had the courage to leave him on her own.” She paused and shook her head even more quickly. “No — I *know* she never would have.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“You couldn’t have known. But I suspect that a lot more went on in that trailer than we know, and we may never find out. The records are sealed, Josh and Charlotte won’t talk about it, and Cal doesn’t seem to remember much. No one else knows how bad it really was. But I know it must have been awful because Josh gets really angry if the subject comes up. And Charlotte, she can get an anxiety attack. Mom can’t handle it, so she pretty much forbade us to talk about it.

“Mom and Dad paid for the divorce, but it was long and ugly. Kurt didn’t want to admit that anyone would dare leave him so he fought tooth and nail for the boys. *He* didn’t want them — he just didn’t want *Charlotte* to have them. But Mom and Dad had a good lawyer, and we won. Charlotte was able to get therapy for the boys because the State paid for it, but she didn’t have insurance, so she never got any help. She felt bad because Mom and Dad spent so much on the divorce — she refused to impose on them to pay any more for her to get counseling. We were all relieved when she married Hal. I’m really glad I introduced them.”

“You did? How’d you know him?”

“About four years ago, Mel’s contracting business picked up, so he hired Hal to do the books and the taxes. I’d been doing the books up until then, but it just got to be too much with me working full time. When I found out he was single, I took a chance and invited Charlotte over when he was going to be there. One thing led to another, and they made a connection. They’ve been married for almost two years now. He’s really good to her and the boys.” Arlene’s face softened. “Like a knight in shining armor rescuing the damsel in distress. He really loves and encourages her, but she still doesn’t have any self-confidence.”

“I’m glad for her. The only thing I knew about Kurt was the hint I got when I first met all of you, and Karen said everyone was glad Kurt was out of the picture. I was curious, but I didn’t ask since I didn’t know you then.”

“It’s okay. But just keep it in mind that she’s our little sister and we protect her.”

Sharon nodded.

“Well, I guess you’re our little sister, too.”

Sharon sensed a trace of animosity.

“But you’re pretty stable, and you don’t seem to need protection. That and your perfect husband would kill anyone who tried to hurt you.” She turned to leave.

As Sharon buttoned her coat, she thought, *What’s eating her?* But then she decided to stay positive and give her the benefit of the doubt. *Maybe I’m just imagining things.*

Arlene looked back at Sharon. “I guess we’ll see you on Sunday.”

“I look forward to it.”

She saw Arlene rolling her eyes as she turned away to leave.

By evening, the rain had stopped, and the temperature had dropped to near freezing. The oven in Bonnie’s kitchen had warmed the house and filled the air with the aroma of herb-roasted chicken and scalloped potatoes.

She hummed happily as she set the table for dinner. When she heard the door to John’s car close, she grinned and walked over to the front door. She pulled aside the curtain to see when he’d get to the porch and opened the door for him. She looked up at him and smiled.

“Hi, Bonnie.” Although John was less than average height, he still had six inches on her. His styled, black hair created a stark contrast to his pale complexion. That and his slight frame almost made him appear sickly. He started to unbutton his overcoat with his manicured fingers.

“Oh, John, that big TV of yours is going to come in real handy,” she announced as she closed the front door.

He turned around from hanging up his overcoat in the hall closet. His hazel eyes narrowed to slits, almost closing them. “Huh? What’re you talking about?”

“We girls decided that it will be just perfect for all you guys to watch the big game here every Sunday. And all us girls are going to go to Sharon’s house while you’re all here. That way we won’t get in your way. But don’t worry, we’ll all make snacks for you, so you won’t go hungry.” She smiled proudly. “Pretty smart, huh?”

“I don’t suppose you thought about asking me first?” He took off his suit jacket and silk tie.

“Well, that huge TV just begs for an audience. You’ll have fun.”

He sighed. “Okay. Whatever.”

“Good, it’s all settled then,” she said, satisfied with herself. “Oh, dinner’s ready.”

He followed her into the dining room and sat down as she placed the food on the table.

“Mom was so surprised today. You would’ve been so proud of me. I didn’t tell her until we were all there at the diner.”

“Will wonders never cease?” he mumbled.

“Oh, and I’m going to help Callie pick out her wedding dress.”

He paused and raised his eyebrows. “Well, that’s no surprise. You and shopping go a long way back.” Then he frowned. “Just don’t you go buying any more stuff for yourself.”

“Well, I’m going to have to get a bridesmaid’s dress.” Then she paused. “Maybe — she hasn’t asked me yet.” She frowned and stopped to think. “Maybe she’ll ask her friends.”

“I’d say that’s probably a safe bet.”

“They haven’t picked a date yet, so it’ll be a while anyway.” After a brief silence, she smiled. “How was it at work?”

“Nothing new. We still have trouble getting applicants to qualify for home loans.”

She looked up. “Well, you’re the manager. Just lower the rates. Then they could afford to buy a house.”

“Bonnie, the recession has reduced people’s income and assets. That’s why they can’t qualify.”

“Exactly. If the rates were less, then they could afford it.” She smiled proudly as she tilted her head.

He stared at her blankly as she started chattering about the rest of her day. Each time she giggled, his attention faded a little more. The longer he brooded, the more he tuned her out. During a lull in her monologue, he picked up his plate and plopped down in the living room. He reached over, pulled a beer out of the mini fridge, turned on the TV, and cranked up the volume.

Bonnie, oblivious, hummed happily as she cleared the table and washed the dishes.