

Unwanted Sister
By Sandra Denbo and Tamarine Vilar

Chapter 1

Even for Portland, it was cold for mid-February. A polar vortex had settled in; thankfully without the snow.

Callie Cooper dressed quickly; she was late for her run. She'd have to cut it short in order to get back in time to take a shower and make breakfast for her dad's parents. She lived with them, and loved being their caregiver.

She put her red hair into a ponytail, the long waves draping her neck. She put on her warm jogging suit and pulled on a headband to protect her ears. She grabbed her phone and locked the door on her way out, and stretched. She puffed mini-clouds of steam as she headed towards the hill.

This part of the city had no curbs, so she ran along the edge of the pavement. At least there was that much; a lot of the roads near here were merely rutted, dirt lanes. Several of the roadside mailboxes had their flags up; the neighborhood still felt safe enough that no one worried about mail theft.

Running was her time to think. Lately, she couldn't think of anything else but that pivotal conversation with Gary just a few months ago. He was the same age as her older brother, Mark. With him living next door when they were growing up, the two boys spent a lot of time together. Callie, of course, tagged along as often as possible, so she always looked at him as a best friend. But when Gary's mother died of cancer when he was ten, Callie's parents became his surrogate parents. He managed pretty well, and even landed a full scholarship to college. By the time Gary left for college, he was happy to be leaving his father's house.

Gary's father, Billy, had been so grieved when his wife died that he couldn't function, and basically left Gary to fend for himself. Billy turned to alcohol to dull the agony, and Gary grew more distant from him. Any love he had felt for his father as a child morphed into pity, disgust, and resentment.

Due to an accident the previous year, and the desire to watch his son walk across the stage at his college graduation, Billy managed to get sober. He was still alcohol-free, and Gary was only beginning to reconnect with him.

For all those years growing up, Callie had come to think of him as another brother. So, when he confessed his romantic feelings for her seven months ago, the revelation had hit her like a ton of bricks. She'd never suspected he felt that way. She couldn't recall anything she'd done to encourage him or give him the impression that she thought of him in any way other than as a brother. Since it had been so unexpected, she was still sorting out her feelings about him. When she looked back on all those years of practical jokes, banter, and teasing, she tried to recall any hint of a crush growing. Was he really in love with her or was it just infatuation? He was shy, so maybe he just felt comfortable around her? Callie had been burned by love before, so maybe that was part of what was holding her back.

She shook her head thinking how it was actually a new acquaintance who'd noticed his feelings for her, and she hadn't picked up on it. *Some detective I am* she thought as she ran past the park. *I couldn't even figure that out on my own. And poor Gary, he was so shy that he never acknowledged it until I asked him if what Vera said was true.*

A bit of resentment moved her faster as she rehashed that conversation with Mark at the bowling alley when they were on that double-date – him with his fiancée, Marci, and her with Gary. She had agreed to the date to give Gary a chance, to see if there might be a spark. Marci had left to get drinks for everyone, and Gary was getting ready to roll the ball when Mark confessed that he had known about Gary's feelings for years and he'd never said a word. Gary had turned around just in time to see her punch Mark's arm; not an unusual thing between them. She had barely noticed that Gary's smile turned to worry when she growled at Mark, "Why didn't you say something?"

"Hey, it was between you and him. It would've been weird coming from me. And you might have thought I was reading something out of nothing. Besides, how weird would it be pimping out my own sister?"

Laughing, she knew he was right, and she reluctantly agreed. Then she noticed Gary approaching. She'd never felt more embarrassed, date or not.

Reliving the red face, she muttered angrily as she ran, "I'm so stupid! How could I not see it? Even mom knew! And Marci! And Rudy! Did the whole city know?" Frustrated and embarrassed, she pounded the pavement even harder. She cut across the parking lot at the convenience store to head back.

Regaining her senses, she decided to look at the positive, as mom and dad taught her. She had already started a sheet of positives and negatives at home to figure out this new relationship. Well, new to *her*. She went over it for the umpteenth time, *Gary is already a good friend, I trust him, I like him as a person, I enjoy his company, and he makes me laugh*. Then she moaned inside as she reminded herself that he knew all her secrets. *I've told him things I haven't even told Mark. And I certainly haven't told mom or dad. And he can be so irritating! He always manages to rile me up. I think he even enjoys it!* Could she change the way she thought about him?

They had already had a few dates since that embarrassing moment at the bowling alley. Yes, they had fun, as usual; but that transition to a relationship – could it really happen? *It's already become awkward. And what happens if things don't work out with him? I could lose my best friend.*

She thought about his troubled past. Although Billy was alcohol-free now, he'd spent more than twelve years as an alcoholic. Since Callie's parents basically raised Gary as their own since his dad wouldn't, or couldn't, they had become his Mom and Dad. Her mood softened as she remembered his words, "They saved my life. I don't know what would have happened to me if they hadn't taken me under their wings." Suddenly, she wanted to give him a comforting hug. But that was from sympathy, right? Or was it more than that? She still had a lot of thinking to do.

She slowed to a trot when she saw her grandparent's house beyond the trees. Cooling down during the last few blocks had been a habit, but with all the distractions, she'd forgotten. She slowed down and walked past the driveway. She'd have to pass the house and return. *That's all I need, another delay*, she berated herself.

She let out a sigh of relief when she approached the gravel driveway again, and she pulled out her key. She stopped at the front to stretch again.

When she entered the house, the familiar feeling of belonging wrapped its arms around her and her anxiety waned. She looked around her grandparents' living room and the comfortable, eclectic feel Grandma had given it. Nothing matched, yet it all fit together. She wouldn't change a thing, except maybe a bigger TV.

It felt good to be a caregiver for those you love. Cora, her grandma, was pretty self-sufficient, but Grandpa had needed more help, especially after she moved in. Years of alcoholism, thankfully addressed and curbed a couple years ago, had taken its toll on his health. On top of that, years of poor eating habits had resulted in type-2 diabetes, and all the health issues that came with it. Nobody knew how long he lived with diabetes before it was diagnosed. He had always resisted doctors with a vengeance, and he still did.

Determined to stop the escalating damage to his body, Callie tried to cook whenever possible. Although she only knew the basics, she was trying. It was difficult getting him to change his eating habits after decades of junk food and alcohol, and he invariably managed to sneak in poor choices.

Yesterday was a shock. Cora had discovered an angry sore on the bottom of his foot. Of course, Ralph had lost all sensation in his feet due to the diabetes, so he didn't realize it was there. They immediately made the appointment with the foot doctor for today. Callie had been berating herself ever since. *Some caregiver I am! But then, he resists most of our efforts to help.*

She showered, got dressed, and gently knocked on their bedroom door to wake them. Her hair was still damp from toweling it dry as she went to the kitchen to start breakfast. She put on the coffee pot and a pot of water to boil. Cora had insisted on oatmeal for breakfast every morning, so the routine was mindless. By the time she set the table, they were dressed and coming out of their room. He looked up, saw her, and said, "Trouble's here."

Ralph said this every time she walked in the door. On the surface, he gave the impression of being a curmudgeon, but she knew that was his way to say he loved her. She smiled.

Despite getting sober, Ralph had aged more quickly in the last couple of years. More wrinkles appeared and they became deeper, looking like etchings. Heavy bags sagged under his grey eyes; even the color seemed to have faded. He had gotten weaker which emphasized his limp, forcing him to use a walker outside the house. Hairs on his bald pate had thinned even more, and that actually gave him an excuse to avoid combing his hair. He argued that nobody noticed, so why bother. But Callie could tell, and she figured Grandma just didn't bother to make an issue of it. No sense in causing an unnecessary stir. That was another lesson from her parents: pick your battles. Callie's dad had probably learned that from Grandma. She certainly had to pick her battles during Ralph's years of alcoholism.

They sat down just as breakfast was ready. Cora was dressed comfortably in pink sweats, her favorite color. She still sported the pixie haircut she'd gotten as Ralph was getting sober. The dyed blonde color was perfect for her round face, enhancing her soft brown eyes. Since their menu had better choices, Cora had lost weight, and that made her more perky and cheerful.

Since Ralph was getting better nutrition, his attitude had improved too; although, he still had his cranky moments. Callie's uncles came around more often now that Ralph wasn't always on their case; and that relieved Callie's dad from having to do most of the household repairs.

Cora seemed to examine Callie's face as she adjusted her chair. Cora placed her hand on Callie's arm and said soothingly, "It's not your fault. He wouldn't even let me look at his foot until yesterday."

"But I'm responsible for his care." Callie pled.

Cora shook her head. "It is what it is. It's not your fault if he won't let you see it."

Feeling uneasy, Callie urged, "Let's eat, we don't want to be late."

All through this, Ralph seemed detached, disinterested. Callie wondered if he was purposely ignoring them. A closer look confirmed the third possibility. "Grandpa, did you put in your hearing aids?"

When he didn't answer, she got up to fetch them. She placed them on the table next to his applesauce.

He looked at them, surprised, "Ah guess Ah fergot. Thanks." He poked them in his ears and kept eating.