

Chapter One

“We’re moving *where*?” I heard Mom pronounce the name but thought I must have heard it wrong.

“Mudville. South of Toronto, on Lake Erie. We’re moving in with your aunt Stella,” said Mom.

I relaxed a bit. I know Aunt Stella from family reunions in Cape Cod. She is my mother’s older sister. I like her a lot.

And I’d heard of Toronto, of course. It is a big

city. Not big by New York standards, maybe. But we weren't actually going to live in Toronto.

"Mudville. Seriously?" I asked. "So what's in Mudville? Besides mud?"

Mom paused. "Not a whole lot. Apparently they're known for their pickles. And they have a big fish."

Fish? "Just one?"

"It's a statue. There's also a fishing regatta. The Mudcat Festival, I think it's called."

"Why on earth would they ever move to Canada?" I said. "It's winter all year round! More important, why are we moving there? You know I'm allergic to snow."

"Uncle Phil inherited a pub. Since he died, your aunt has been all alone. She runs the pub now. We're going to live above it. And it is not winter all year round. Mudville is just north of the border."

"We're going to live in a pub? Now *that's* cool," I said.

"I thought you'd like that part," said Mom, rolling her eyes.

A change of scenery would probably be good. Things had been tough the last few months. High school sucked. And I don't mean the homework. People avoid you when they know your dad is in prison. They ghost you. It changes everything, and it's not fair.

None of this was my fault. Or my mom's.

"But this is only until I finish high school, right?" I said. "We'll be coming back here eventually."

Mom raised an eyebrow. "Let's take it one step at a time. It will be nice to get a fresh start."

I heard the words she didn't say. *Without your dad. Without the shame and fear that follow us everywhere.*

"We'll get you there next week. Then I'll wrap up things here and be in Mudville by the end of the month. Is that okay with you?"

"We're taking Ollie, right?" I felt the first signs

of panic. Going anywhere without my dog was out of the question, as far as I was concerned.

“Of course! He’s part of the family.”

Ollie is a huge dog of unknown pedigree.

A better name for him would have been Scruffy.

“What’s the pub called?” I asked.

“The Big Dill,” said Mom. “Because of the pickle factory.”

Hard to believe, but true. One week later, I saw it all for myself.

Chapter Two

I have a secret. Not even Mom knows this one.

I’m still talking to my dad. We found a way.

After Dad was charged, Mom and I were hounded by journalists. They parked in front of our house, with vans and cameras. They followed me to school. You can imagine the headlines they were after. *Interview with the Killer’s Daughter.*

It was awful. If this is what rock stars go through, I never want to be one.

I dropped out of school in June to avoid them. Mom had to leave work. It was like we were prisoners ourselves. So when she said we were moving to Canada, I couldn't wait. But here's the thing.

Dad's lawyer was worried about people tracing our correspondence and figuring out where we lived. The tabloids were annoying, but this was more about the Mob. The lawyer said we couldn't have any contact with Dad at all. That was the only way we could drop off the radar. Be safe.

So Dad and I don't send emails. But we do write them.

I'm particularly proud of the system we've been using, because I thought of it myself. I created a new email account. I gave Dad the password before he was hauled off to jail. Every few days, I go in

and leave a message in the Drafts file. Dad logs in from his end and reads the draft message. Then he deletes it and writes his own.

No emails sent. Nothing to trace.

This is what he wrote last night:

Hi, Bugs. Thanks for letting me know where you're going. All okay here. It's tough inside, but I'm used to tough. Don't worry about me. Let me know how you settle in. Love you.

When I was little, I couldn't say my own name, Penny. It came out Bunny. So Dad started calling me Bugs, as in Bugs Bunny.

It made me feel good when he called me that in the email. It also made me sad. I miss him so much.

Dad accepted a plea in order to get a lighter sentence. That's what the lawyer told us. But I know better. He pleaded guilty to avoid a trial. In a trial, everything comes out.

I don't know why he killed that man. No one would tell me. They said it was safer for me not to know.

But one day I'll find out.

Everything went according to plan. Mom drove me to the border. Aunt Stella was waiting there, ready to drive me and my stuff (and Ollie) to Mudville. She even got me a new cell phone. One with a Canadian phone number.

Mom would join us a week later. We wouldn't communicate again before then, just to be safe. I hugged her tightly as we said our goodbyes.

It was a beautiful summer day. Aunt Stella and I arrived in Mudville just after lunch. She parked the car around back. As we walked up the sidewalk, Ollie bounding around us like a maniac, Aunt Stella gave me a side hug. "Welcome to the

Big Dill. Everyone around here calls it the Dilly. It will be great having you here. I've been pretty lonely since Phil died."

I hugged her back. Maybe this would be a good thing for her too.

Aunt Stella looks a lot like Mom, only older and a bit slimmer. Her shoulder-length brown hair was pulled back with clips. Her great big smile was irresistible.

The door to the pub looked freshly painted. The top half was all screen. The bottom half had a picture of a smiling green pickle wearing sunglasses. Not kidding. The door swung inward easily.

Ollie beat me in the door. I stepped across the threshold. It wasn't as dark inside as I had expected it to be. My eyes easily adjusted. Lots of light poured in from windows on three sides. A man with gray hair sat at a round wooden

table by one of the windows. He looked up and squinted.

“Jeez Louise, Stella. They’ve finally gone and done it. Crossed a poodle with a grizzly bear.”

Aunt Stella darted ahead of me. “Now you behave yourself, Vern.”

“Or is it a woolly mammoth?” said Vern.

Aunt Stella gave Vern a playful swat. “Thanks for looking after the place this morning. This is my niece, Penny. And this gorgeous boy is Ollie.” She reached down to scratch Ollie behind the ear. She didn’t have to reach down very far, of course. “Never mind the grumpy old man, Ollie. Good boy. Aren’t you a handsome fellow.”

Ollie started to whimper. He wanted more scratches. Some guard dog he was.

Vern stood up. He was much taller than I had expected. Close on six feet. He shuffled up to us and peered at me with surprisingly blue eyes.

He put out a large, knobby hand. “I’m Vern.”

Ollie growled.

“Ollie, stand down,” I commanded. “Friend.” Ollie relaxed. He wagged his bushy tail and yipped. “Nice to meet you.”

“Wait until you meet Wolfgang,” Aunt Stella said, still rubbing the pooch.

“Who’s Wolfgang?” I asked.

“Tara’s dog. You’ll meet them both soon. In fact…” Aunt Stella turned to look at the back door. “That will be Simon now,” she said. “He and his friends wanted to be here to welcome you.”

“That’s nice,” I said. Simon is my cousin. From Uncle Phil’s first marriage. Aunt Stella and Uncle Phil used to bring him down to Cape Cod most summers. I like Simon, although he is sort of nerdy. He likes old movies and things.

Simon is a year older than me. I am counting on him to help me adjust to the new school in the fall.